

Communicating in the Workplace

Administrative Accounting and Bookkeeping Program

Handout: Business Presentations

1. Before You Present

For this course we'll consider a business presentation everything from a small group briefing to a large formal presentation with visual aids. No matter how small or large, though, presentations have certain characteristics as a channel. They are a form of synchronous group communication (meaning that they include three or more people, all connected at the same time).

Why a Presentation?

If you think about presentations you've attended over the years, a few strengths of this channel are obvious:

1. Presentations allow you to imbue a message with your personality, with your enthusiasms and beliefs about your topic. When you are speaking face-to-face, or even in a video conference, you can use your tone of voice, your expression, and your body language to emphasize key points that are most important to you; and
2. Presentations also allow for interactivity with the audience. You can take questions and answer them in real time. If people are confused about something, you can clarify it immediately and allay any fears or doubts the audience has. In short, a presentation allows you to talk *to* your audience rather than at them in a way no other channel does.



On the other hand, presentations have some significant costs:

1. They are costly in time. When you multiply the time taken for the presentation times the number of people attending, they use up many person hours that could otherwise have

been spent doing useful work. So, presentations should only be used when the outcome justifies the time spent; and

2. Following along a spoken presentation is much harder than with a written document. You cannot scan back to check page numbers or chapter headings to orient yourself or re-read an unclear passage. So, presentations must have a simple, clear organization. And they are not suited to conveying a lot of detailed information.

Therefore, the first step in any presentation is to decide whether your message should even be delivered as a presentation. Does it need the personal touch of an oral presentation so much that it justifies the time it will take from the audience?

For example: if your institution is implementing a new IT policy that will cause some headaches and lost time for your staff, a brief presentation could well be the best way to introduce these changes. There's no other form of delivery that allows you to show your personal support for the new policy, explain why it's necessary, answer questions from the doubters in real time, and allay the fears of the nervous. These are all excellent reasons for an oral presentation.

Have a Clear Purpose

The next step is to ensure you're clear about both your purpose and your audience. Asking the following questions is a good way to achieve this clarity:

- What is your core message, the *one* essential takeaway you want everyone to leave with?
- Is your primary purpose:
 - To inform your audience (of a new policy, event, or other development?).
 - To motivate them? Or
 - To obtain feedback?

If it's to motivate, a large, enthusiastic group can help build buzz. If to obtain feedback, you may want to limit the size of the audience to give everyone time to participate. You'll also need to build in more time for questions, both to and from the audience.

Be Audience Focussed

"Be audience focussed," is common advice, but putting yourself in your audience's shoes and looking at your presentation through their eyes is one of the single most important things any presenter can do. Always, as you prepare to present, think about who your audience is and how they will receive your message. For example:

- Their level of technical knowledge should influence your choice of language.
- How much they already know about the topic should influence how much background you need to provide.
- How receptive they are will influence how persuasive you need to be.

Research & Prepare First

Finally, thoroughly research and prepare any raw materials needed for your presentation. It's generally best to conduct your research first, as a separate step, before you start drafting your presentation and preparing your slides.

! *TIP: Begin preparing your presentation as early as possible. This will set your resting mind to work on it even when you aren't consciously thinking about your presentation. At odd moments (those famous shower thoughts) your subconscious will produce ideas. Keep a notebook with you, or have some other way to jot these down, so you can quickly capture them as they occur.*

2. Structuring an Effective Presentation

Organizing Your Presentation

As noted in Reading 2-1, an oral presentation is much harder for an audience to follow than a written document. Therefore, your organization needs to be simple and obvious. The following standard format is a sound basic framework that works for almost any topic:

1. Introduction,
2. Main Body, and
3. Conclusion.

Each of these sections has a few specific purposes you want to achieve.

The Introduction

The “Hook” -- Capturing Your Audience’s Attention

As mentioned, the main purpose of the introduction is to get your audience’s attention and establish your credibility before providing a summary or preview of your main points (and the overall theme or message of your presentation).

Standard gambits for getting attention include:

- Making a promise (“By the end of this presentation, you will have changed your mind about...”).
- Asking a question (“Do you know why we’re seeking diploma status for our new RMT programme?”).
- Making a joke (How many college presidents does it take to screw in a light bulb?).

All of these can be effective, and your choice should be based on what works for your personality and what’s appropriate for the audience and occasion. (A joke would be a bad way to start a presentation about layoffs, obviously.)

Establishing Your Credibility

After getting your audience's attention, introduce yourself and show you have the necessary expertise by:

- Briefly listing your credentials or experience, or
- Mentioning how you've faced the same dilemma or issues as your audience (this is a *great* way to build empathy with your audience).

Keep in mind that both your attention-getter and your credibility statement need to be brief. The audience is giving you their precious time, and you need to get to the topic at hand. So, your credibility statement should flow smoothly into the introduction of your theme and overview of your main body points.

Introducing Your Theme

The introduction of your theme should also be brief. The theme is your “take” on the subject or your presentation's message.

Preview Your Points

This is a quick, high-level preview of your main points. The objective is to give the audience enough information about your topic that they can set up a mental framework before you get into the details with your main body. This enables them to fit those details into an existing structure in their mind as you explain them, which greatly aids comprehension. For short or simple presentations, the introduction of your theme, and the overview of the presentation might be combined into a single statement.

The Main Body

In the main body, you need to make your case in two to four main points that follow logically from one another and support your core message. A real interest-killer is the presentation that doesn't follow a logical order but consists of a bunch of random points—the “one damn thing after another” style of organization.

To avoid this, each of your main points should lead logically to the following one, which builds on the points that went before. When you're thinking about how to order your main points, it can be helpful to put them in order according to one of the following principles (whichever is most appropriate for your topic):

- **Chronological** is useful for topics such as the development of a programme or the evolution of your department; you could start with the present state and work backward in time or—more easily—start with the origin and describe each stage of development to the present day.

- **Geography/space** is good for topics that deal with operations or events in multiple locations; the operation of a multi-campus department, for example, with each location as one of your main points.
- **Comparison/contrast** is useful for presentations that look at alternative courses of action.
- **Value/size** is appropriate for comparing options when a selection needs to be made.
- **Importance** ordering your main body by the importance of each point works well for a variety of topics. Usually, you'll start with the least important point and work up to finish with the most important but, in certain situations, it can work to start with the most important (especially if you think you might run out of time).
- **Problem/solution** works very well when proposing a course of action or solution to a current business problem or situation.
- **Simple/complex** is appropriate for a variety of topics, making it easy to build understanding by starting simple and working up to more complex examples.
- **Best case/worst case** is a good sort order when looking at future possibilities or doing a SWOT/threat analysis.

It's easy for audiences of oral presentations to lose track of where they are, so you should include clear signposts to let them know when you're moving from point to the next, or on to the next stage of the presentation. As you leave one main point for the next, make a clear transition statement, something like the following:

- "Before I move on to the next point, are there any questions....."
- "Summarizing this point..."
- "If you thought that was good, wait till you hear what happened next..."

The Conclusion

Your conclusion is vitally important. As mentioned above, it's where you'll summarize your theme and main body points. That makes it your last chance to reinforce your theme, clear up any misunderstandings. It's also normally where you'll take questions, distribute any handouts, and (you hope) send your audience away feeling energized and positive.

Summary/Conclusion

After the last point of your main body, take a beat so that there's a clear transition to your conclusion. Make sure your audience knows that you're not introducing new points but summarizing what they just heard. The repetition helps them remember their message, and this high-level overview is a good chance to emphasize the core message (the theme) of your presentation.

Take Questions

Being able to answer questions immediately is an important feature of most presentations. To maintain your momentum, and avoid being dragged off track, it's generally advisable to limit questions during the presentation. I will often take one or two questions at the end of each main point to emphasize the transition. Then I'll move on with a mention that I want to respect their time, but that there will be a chance for questions at the end.

The danger of taking questions at the end is that too many presenters get nervous and treat it as a chance to re-litigate points they fear they didn't give enough emphasis to during the presentation. That is, when they receive a question, they don't really answer it but instead use it as a launching pad to emphasize something they think they missed or didn't give enough coverage to. Don't do this! It's disrespectful to the questioner and will lose you a lot of audience goodwill.

You had your chance to make your points during the presentation. The question session belongs to your audience, so let them have it. Some principles to follow:

- Listen to each question respectfully.
- Repeat the question in your words to ensure you understood it (this is also a useful way to ensure everyone in the audience hears the question, especially if the questioner has a quiet voice).
- Answer the question!
- If you don't know the answer to the question, admit that you don't know (there's no faster way to lose an audience's trust than to try to fake an answer).
- If you don't know the answer to a question, offer to check into it and follow up by email or some other means (but only if you're going to do it; the second-fastest way to lose an audience's trust is to make promises you don't keep).

Finally, though you need to be respectful of your audience, they will sometimes ask long, rambling questions that don't really relate to your topic, or that are of interest to that person only. If you don't keep control, it's easy for the question session to start dragging and for the energy level to drop. A good way to keep things on track is to be straightforward and honestly say, "That's beyond the scope of today's talk, but you and I can follow up later if you like."

Distribute Handouts

I've already mentioned that the spoken word is a terrible way to convey detailed or technical information. Many presentations, thus, will need an accompanying handout. This gives the audience a handy reference for your talk, and is the place to put policy or planning details, web links, addresses, phone numbers, etc.

The question, then, is whether you should distribute handouts at the beginning of the presentation, or at the end. If you hand them out at the beginning, the audience can follow along, checking the details as you speak. This might be appropriate for financial reports and

some very technical presentations, but I'm not in favour of it generally. Remember that the whole point of an oral presentation is to imbue the message with your personality and make a personal connection with the audience. You lose some of that connection if they're rustling papers, looking at your handout, and reading, rather than looking at you.

Therefore, for most presentations, I recommend distributing any papers or handouts at the end. While you're taking questions, or at the end of questions, is a good time. It's a good idea, though, to let the audience know at the beginning that you will be giving them a handout. Knowing that they don't need to try to memorize, or make a note of, everything you're saying eliminates a lot of stress and makes it easier for them to follow along with you.

Strong Finish

Finally, thank the audience for their time. And finish the presentation with a strong closing statement that sends them away, energized by the message they've just heard.

It's all too easy for the question session to trail off, as you deal with the last enquiry or two, and check whether anyone else has questions. Too often I've seen this leave the audience wondering whether the talk is over or not. And then all the energy goes out of the room as they start to guiltily drift away.

Instead, once you're done with questions, and any handouts are distributed, quickly get the centre of attention back on yourself. Do this with a bold statement that clearly ends the talk and lets you send the audience away as a cohesive group, fired up with the spirit of your message and ready to put your words into action!

Good types of closing statements include:

- Words of encouragement, ("This may look complicated, but I know you can do it!").
- Best wishes, ("Good luck as you put this into practice for yourself").

3. Building Your Presentation

Start With an Outline

I'm a big believer in outlines, and they're a great way see the structure of your presentation and to quickly reorganize your points as you start getting them down, *before* you get distracted by the fun of laying out slides or choosing images. You don't need any special software for this; Microsoft Word has an excellent outline view built in. Start by entering your three main headings as separate paragraphs:

- Introduction.
- Main Body.
- Conclusion.

Format each in Word's Heading 1 Style. Then, use the RETURN (ENTER) key to start filling in your points beneath each heading. Use a separate line for each main point and format these in the Heading 2 Style. Add your details as a bulleted list under each point. If a point is big enough, you can divide it into sub-points (again, each on a separate line) formatted in the Heading 3 Style.

There's no need to be too careful about the order of your points; get in the flow and jot down your ideas as they come to you. You can always sort out the organization later by switching into Outline View and changing the order of your points and sub-points by simply dragging their heading markers up and down. As you start filling in your points with bullets or paragraph text, it's easy to alternate between creating and organizing your content by switching between the normal Page View and Outline View at any time.

There are two big advantages to starting with an outline:

It's much easier to quickly get your thoughts down as you know you can reorganize them later.

It forces you to focus on your content—your ideas—without the distraction of worrying about the appearance of your slide formats, illustrations, or other graphical elements (which should come later).

Avoiding Death by PowerPoint

Now that you've finished your research, decided on a theme, and developed your outline, the next step is to think about your visual aids. For most presentations, this means a slide deck of some sort. And this is where far too many presentations go wrong.

Anyone who's worked in an office for more than a day or two has likely suffered the experience known as, "Death by PowerPoint". That's where the speaker, worried about missing any of their Very Important Ideas, puts literally every detail of the presentation on their slides (crowding them with many, many bullet points). Since that turns the slides into something close to a speaking script, they inevitably end up turning away from their audience and reading from the screen as they present.

There goes any eye contact—or emotional connection — with their audience that they might have had. Worse, reading a script word-for-word drains any speaker's voice of spontaneity and enthusiasm. This doesn't just make for a dull, boring presentation; it's a fact that humans can read silently faster than any speaker can read aloud. So, by the time the presenter has lifelessly droned halfway through each slide, they've already reached the end and are shrieking inwardly in frustration at having to wait.

Bored audiences don't retain much, so "death by PowerPoint" presentations always result in an audience that's both forgetful of the message and disaffected with the person who subjected them to this agony. The usual comment after a "Death By PowerPoint" session is: "If all he/she

was going to do was read from a script, why didn't they just email it to us? I could have read it faster myself."

The key to avoiding "Death by PowerPoint" is to remember why you've chosen an oral presentation in the first place. As a communication channel, presentations have the unique advantage that they let you make a personal connection with a whole audience and imbue a well-prepared, well-structured message with your personality. (A face-to-face conversation works similarly, but only with a single person or small group, and lacks the group element of a presentation.) In sum, an oral presentation lets you do four things better than almost any other channel:

1. Ensure your message is understood by everyone in the group,
2. Use your personal beliefs, experience, and enthusiasm to emphasize the key elements of your message,
3. Persuade a group that a decision or course of action is the correct one, and
4. Get instant feedback from your audience.

All these benefits rely on your emotional connection with the audience—on maintaining eye contact and speaking naturally and fluently *to* them, not just *at* them. If you're not going to do this, there's no point in getting a group together for a presentation; send an email instead.

After all, sending a group email, putting up posters, publishing an article in the newsletter, or posting it on the company website will get the information out to your people — a lot easier than gathering them together for a presentation. But, if you want your audience to understand your message, none of these options have the impact of an oral presentation. Busy people barely read their emails, and any message you send will likely get lost in the clutter. Even if they read it, there's a good chance they'll just skim over the key ideas with little discrimination for the important elements.

The Real Reason to Use Slides

So, if we're to make our presentation work as a *presentation*, what role do the slides have? Remember that, for all their advantages, oral presentations do have a couple of downsides, and this is where slides can help:

- As noted above, it can be very hard for an audience to follow the steps of an oral presentation and stay oriented as to where they are in the argument (is this still supporting material for point two, or have we moved onto a new point?); and
- With nothing but a presenter's spoken word to go by, it can be very difficult for an audience to picture, in any sort of concrete detail, what they are talking about.

So, your slides can help through using title slides to clearly mark each major section of your presentation (introduction, main body points, and conclusion). Use a common slide layout as a Section Title slide for each of these. Make this distinctive enough that every time the audience sees it, they know you're beginning a new main body point or moving on to the conclusion. You

can also number the title slides for your main points to make it even easier for the audience to know exactly where they are in the presentation.

How to Avoid Death by Powerpoint

1. Why present?



After your title slide, you don't need to spell out all the details for your points on the detail slides. Remember, that you're peaking to these points and emphasizing the important facts with your spoken word. All you need on the slide is a summary, or even just a heading with an image below it, to help your audience visualize what you're talking about.

In fact, photographs, images, charts, and graphics are often the most useful things to put on your slides. They help the audience visualize your point and an image that surprises or delights can be a great memory aid. Note that it doesn't have to be a literal image to help them recall your key points.

Physical Barriers

Use an appropriate channel:

- Face-to-face.
- Email.
- Telephone.
- Text.
- Group presentation.

(Ensure the channel is working well with no unnecessary friction.)



Notice that neither of the above roles for your slides includes laying out your arguments as bullet points. Not only is this unnecessary, remember that putting too much detail on your slides has negative effects:

1. Your slides become your script, and you turn away from your audience, breaking contact with them, to read from your slides,
2. You lose the flexibility that should be part of a proper presentation; when your script is written out in full as bullet points on slides, you lose your flexibility to add extra detail when the audience doesn't understand, or skip ahead if some detail proves unnecessary,
3. Your audience starts ignoring you and reads your slides instead (inevitable since reading comprehension is faster than anyone can talk).

So, if you do use PowerPoint, always keep in mind that it is only there to reinforce your argument. You are the one presenting, and it is your words that make the argument. Only you can see if the audience is falling behind, and slow down or repeat an explanation. Or, if the audience has got the point, and it's time to move on.

Put the Details in a Handout

So, if your slides are not the place to include all the details, dates, and numbers of your presentation, where do they go? This is the sort of thing for which a printed handout is the perfect channel. As discussed in the previous Reading, put any reference information you want the audience to retain in a nicely formatted document. Normally, these are distributed at the end of the presentation, in the conclusion (as discussed above) but, if you are working through a detailed proposal, you might distribute your handout at the beginning and talk through it with your audience.

An alternative, that's increasingly popular with modern audiences, is to .pdf your handout and provide a link to it. Putting the details in the handout also frees you up to be more imaginative in your slide design, and to use simple, attractive layouts that aren't cluttered with a lot of detail.

What About Speaker Notes?

If your slides will not be your script, you'll need some sort of speaker notes to jog your memory and ensure you don't miss any important details (few speakers are so polished and so familiar with their material that they can speak entirely without notes). The important thing about whatever you use for speaker notes is that they shouldn't be so detailed that you fall into the trap of reading from them. As soon as that happens, you lose your spontaneity, your eye contact with the audience, and any flexibility you had to adjust your presentation to their reactions.

So, whatever format you use, you want to limit it to main headings and bullet points for any key ideas you don't want to miss—printed out in a GIANT font so that you can see them immediately!

Script

For these reasons, an actual full script is a bad thing to take on stage with you. Depending upon how much preparation you need, you might write out a full script for your presentation and use it for rehearsals. But be sure you know it well enough that you don't need it on the big day.

Recipe Cards

Many speakers like recipe cards because they're easy to hold in the palm of your hand whilst you're walking around on stage. You can emphasize the organization of your presentation by allocating one card each to your introduction, conclusion, and each main body point. Their small size also means it's impossible to include too much detail, no matter how much you're tempted!

Outline/Bullet Points in a Big Font

If your presentation started with an outline (and I'm a big advocate for this) then you can easily repurpose this as your speaker notes. Just fill in any key points under each heading.

PowerPoint / Keynote Presenter Notes

Another place to put summary or bullet notes is in the presenter notes section of PowerPoint or Apple's Keynote, if you're using these to create your slides. The advantage is that your notes are saved in the same file as the slides, and the Presenter View of both programs shows your notes alongside each slide as you're presenting. The disadvantage is that you can only see the Presenter Notes if you stick close to the podium with your computer screen. If you like to walk about as you present (and I encourage that) recipe cards let you be more mobile.

Other Visual Aids

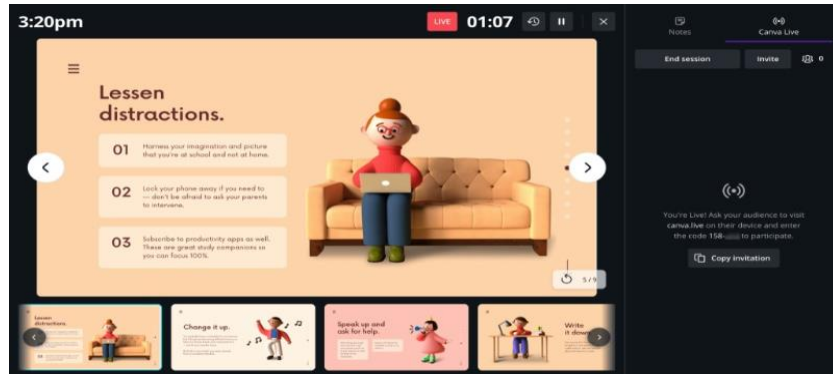
Nowadays, most people default to PowerPoint when they think of visual aids. But PowerPoint isn't the only way to produce a slide deck. If you're on a Mac, Keynote is an excellent alternative, with a similar range of capabilities and a simpler, more streamlined interface and an emphasis on sophisticated typography and elegant design. For people on the go, or looking for a free solution, there is also a new generation of exceptional online slide makers that often put an interesting spin on the traditional deck. The most popular are:

Google Slides

A cloud-based solution with an emphasis on collaboration. Free with a Google account, its integration with Google Drive and their other tools makes this an easy choice for workplaces already invested in the Google ecosystem.

Canva

Canva is user-friendly and has a lot of visually appealing templates. It can be used for free, with premium features available for a fee.



Prezi

Prezi has an enthusiastic fan base that loves its infinite canvas approach that encourages you to zoom in and out of your points in a non-linear order. This works well for dynamic storytelling but needs some adjustment for those used to traditional slide decks.



Other

Finally, slides aren't the only form of visual aid. The overuse of PowerPoint means your audience will be grateful if you use anything else for your presentation. This could include:

- PROPS (such as uniforms, equipment, or sample products).
- PRINTS OR PHOTOGRAPHS.
- CHARTS AND DOCUMENTS to work through together as you explain each section; or
- A good, old-fashioned portable WHITE BOARD or FLIP CHART. These can be a great way to make your presentation more interactive by live diagramming a process or for capturing audience feedback.

Building Your Slide Deck

Most presentations, though, will use a Microsoft PowerPoint/ Apple Keynote slide deck. The advice here is to remember the purpose of your slides, as discussed in the above section, “Avoiding Death by PowerPoint”. That is, to keep your audience oriented as to their current place in the presentation, and to provide visual examples (as needed) of your subject.

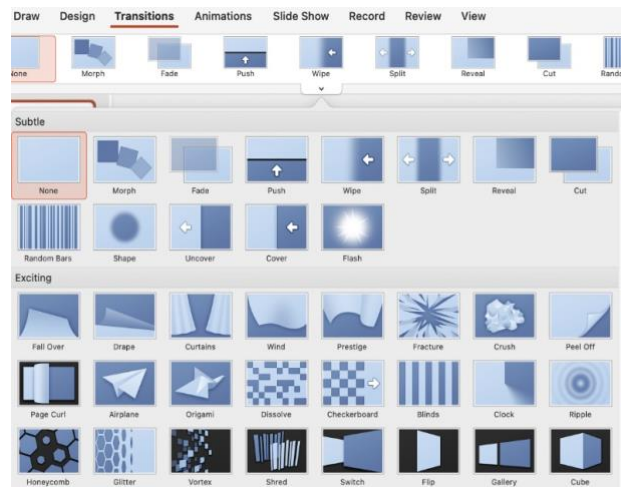
If your slides are to support, rather than distract from your spoken presentation, they should have a consistent, clean, and quiet design, and the slide show should eschew jarring transitions or sound effects. Here’s a method for making your slides that puts the emphasis on supporting content rather than flashy (and distracting) effects.

4. Open PowerPoint (or Keynote) and create a new, blank show (you can choose a Theme later).
5. In the Home Ribbon, click the New Slide Button and choose “Slides from Outline”.
6. An Open Dialogue will appear; navigate to the correct folder and select the Word file with your outline.
7. PowerPoint will insert your outline, creating a new slide for each Heading 1 paragraph, and inserting the Heading 2 paragraphs as bullet points.
8. Emphasize the structure of your show by formatting the Introduction, Main Body, and Conclusion slides with the Section Header slide layout: Home Ribbon > Layout > Section Header; this will distinguish them from the content slides within each section and provide a visual signpost for your audience.
9. Apply an appropriate Theme to format your slides: Design Ribbon > Theme:
10. Note: your institution might have a house Theme you should use; otherwise, choose a Theme that matches your subject.
11. Optional: apply a transition effect between slides by clicking the Transitions Ribbon and choosing a transition:
12. If you do use a Transition effect, use the same Transition on all your slides (before applying the Transition, click in the thumbnail sidebar and press Ctrl+A (Cmd+A) to select all slides).
13. Also, to avoid distracting your audience, it’s probably best to stick to the “Subtle” transitions and ensure the Duration is kept brief.
14. Add any illustrations, photos, charts, or tables by changing the affected slides to appropriate layout and inserting or creating your graphical elements; and
15. Finally, review your slide show to proofread and to ensure no slide is overloaded with more than four to five bullet points.

Transitions & Animations

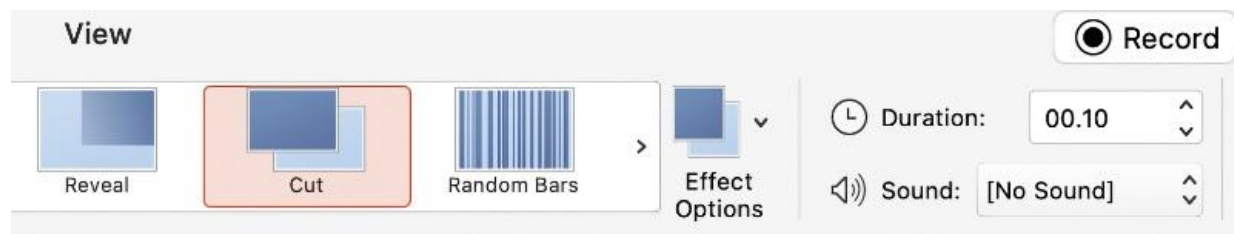
In PowerPoint terminology, Transitions are effects that play between slides while Animations are the effects that can bring the elements on a slide swooping, spinning, and sliding into place.

Both can include sound effects to go along with the visual trickery. New PowerPoint users often get a little over-excited when they see the variety of special effects available and load their slide deck up with a different Transition for each slide and a lively Animation for every slide element.



This soon becomes exhausting for your audience. Worse, rather than listening to you, they're busy wondering what the next dazzling visual or startling sound effect will be. So, in general, the rule for Transitions and Animations is: "less is more".

For most presentations, it's best to use the same, reasonably subtle Transition for all your slides. "Fade", "Wipe", and "Reveal" are all good, unobtrusive choices. (It's easy to apply these to the whole presentation by clicking on a slide thumbnail in the left sidebar and pressing Cmd+A/Ctrl+A to "Select All" before clicking on your choice of Transition.) You can fine tune any Transition by adjusting its speed in the settings box on the Ribbon. Usually, you'll want to speed transitions up to keep your presentation moving. (Again, do this with all the slide thumbnails selected, so your adjustment applies to all of them.) You can also assign a sound to the Transition here. In general, if you shouldn't use more than one or two sound effects in a presentation, and then only to emphasize the most important slide (or, perhaps, the final slide).



Likewise, waiting for each bullet point to animate onto your slide can be both tedious and distracting for your audience. If you do have slides with multiple bullet points, it's often best to eschew Animations and just have them all appear with the slide. If you do want to reveal your points one at a time, then the advice for Transitions applies here as well:

- Use the same, reasonably unobtrusive Animation for all the points, and

- If the effect is slow enough to drag your pacing, use the Animation controls to speed it up.

For more advanced PowerPoint users, the Morph Transition that can be used to achieve some very artful effects, with objects from one slide smoothly morphing into related objects on the next slide. I'll embed a video which shows what can be done.

When everything is ready, rehearse your presentation, speaking it aloud and timing yourself. With a good rehearsal, and this preparation, you're ready to deliver a dynamic, compelling presentation — the opposite of "Death by PowerPoint"!

4. Putting It All Together

Keeping Your Audience's Attention

Now, it's time to present and for all your preparations to pay off. As noted in the previous readings, keeping your audience engaged is the key to a successful presentation. You want to build a rapport with your audience by speaking naturally to them and maintaining eye contact. Here are some useful techniques to help ensure a natural delivery that keeps your audience's attention.

Memorize Your Opening

Even experienced presenters can feel a little intimidated at the beginning of a presentation, which interferes with a natural delivery. A good way to overcome this is to memorize your opening attention getter, word-for-word. You can also write it out in your speaker notes (the only portion of these that should be word-for-word). That's usually enough to get you rolling. And, once you're over this initial hurdle, nervousness is less of a problem.

Move About the Stage

Move about the stage (if you're on one) and get out from behind the podium. This puts you closer to the audience and lets you get close to different parts of the group, so they all feel an active part of the presentation (this is why I prefer recipe cards for my speaker notes, as they're easy to keep with you in the palm of one hand).

Modulating Both the Volume and Speed of Your Voice

Not only does the variety make your presentation sound more natural and interesting, it's also a good way to show the importance of your subject. Normally, you'll slow down and speak louder to emphasize an important point, but it can be equally effective to drop your voice and speak the important part *very* quietly. If the audience is with you, they'll immediately stop any chatter and focus intently on you to hear what you're saying.

Be Animated and Show Emotion

Remember that one of the advantages of an oral presentation is the opportunity it gives you to emphasize what you believe and think is significant. So, don't be afraid to vary your expression and show enthusiasm and genuine emotion.

Use Pauses and Take and Ask Questions

Another good tool for emphasis is to take a little pause before an important point. If the audience is engaged with you, this will whet their appetite for what comes next (so long as you don't make the pause too long!). Likewise, after an important point is a good time to pause and ask for questions before moving on. You can also direct questions to the audience. This is an excellent way to ensure they're listening and build engagement and is something I think most presenters could do more of. Perhaps they're a little shy, or concerned about time, but questions to the audience can be handled quickly (more below).

Illustrate Your Points with Vivid Imagery and Stories

Remember that the point of a presentation is to ensure your audience understands your subject and answer any questions or doubts that they may have. So, don't be afraid to speak to them in their language. And, if they do have questions, don't do what so many speakers do and just repeat what you said—just louder and slower! To persuade your audience, be ready to use vivid imagery storytelling techniques (more on that next unit) such as:

- Analogies.
- Metaphors and similes.
- Personal anecdotes.
- Personalized statistics.
- Worst-and best-case scenarios.
- Examples from experience.

Question Techniques

We discussed when to best take questions from the audience in Reading 2-2, and how to handle them. However, you can also direct questions to your audience. This is a great way to both keep their attention and check their comprehension. There are two basic questioning techniques.

Individual

Where you identify who the question is directed to first, then ask the question. This offers the advantage of speed, but it does mean that as soon as you mention the individual's name, everyone else in the audience can relax and stop paying attention while you're asking the question.

Group

This is my preferred technique. You direct the question to the whole audience, then pick someone to give their answer. It can slow things down a bit if you're not careful. However, you can speed things up, be more dynamic, and turn the question into a fun game with the audience by asking a multipart question and quickly throwing each part to a new person. That is, ask something like:

- “What’s the first step in the communications process?—Kara?”
- Then, as soon as she answers: “And what’s the second step—Peter?”
- And so on.

In addition to two techniques for asking questions, there are two types of question you can ask.

Close Ended

These are questions with a single, specific answer, such as: “Name one of the four things the introduction to your presentation must do.” Close ended questions produce quick answers and so are useful for when you want to get some audience participation and check comprehension while keeping up the pace.

Open Ended

Open-ended questions have numerous possible answers. These are good for encouraging thinking and creative answers. For example: “Is the primary purpose of lifelong learning to advance your career or to develop you intellectually as a more complete human?” Obviously, these will take longer to answer. But, just as a pause can be a useful way to emphasize an important point, the occasional open-ended question can be a good way to examine an important point that is worth spending the time on.

Strong Closing / Thanking the Audience

Finally, I'll emphasize again, that it's easy for an audience to start drifting away in ones and twos as the presentation ends. After you've brought the audience together as a group to hear your message, I think there's no sadder way to end a presentation. You want to send them away, still united as a group and full of enthusiasm for your message.

So, when the scheduled end-time for your presentation arrives, close out questions by getting everyone's attention back on you. Let the audience know they can contact you individually with any questions that remain, and finish with a rousing send-off. A heartfelt thank-you for everyone giving you their time and attention is a good thing to include here, along with a final restatement of your main theme, and an encouraging statement of confidence for their future success.