

12 Commandments for PowerPoint

By Susan Buchholz and Jill Ullman
Purdue University Calumet, Indiana
buchholz@calumet.purdue.edu

PowerPoint has become a major tool used to disseminate information in classrooms. Yet many faculty and students often use PowerPoint in ways that distract and confuse viewers. To help, we've assembled 12 commandments for using PowerPoint effectively.

1. **Thou shalt not put War and Peace on a slide.** Too much text on a slide makes it difficult for a learner to both see and process information. The solutions are easy. Use more slides or outline only major ideas on each slide and then verbally add details.
2. **Thou shalt not use fonts smaller than 28-point.** Do you need bifocals to read slides on a huge projection screen? Why make the learner squint? Not only is that irritating, but it can cause eye fatigue, and viewers miss important information.
3. **Thou shalt not use busy backgrounds or ineffective colors.** Don't make your learner need sunglasses. If a background has too much going on, it competes with the information. Also, poor color choices make slides difficult to read. When broadcasting PowerPoint slides over a two-way video system, yellow is a very difficult color on the viewer's eyes. Consider using aesthetically pleasing color choices with good color contrast. And bear in mind that dark slides in a darkened room in a class after lunch may be just a little too soothing.
4. **Thou shalt not complicate slides with too many figures and tables.** The whole purpose of showing a figure or table is lost when a learner must focus on trying to make sense of all the numeric information. Use a hand-out instead, or refer to a page number or a website where the information can be perused at leisure. If a large table needs to be part of a presentation, break it into chunks on several slides and focus on one aspect of it at a time.
5. **Thou shalt use animation, audio, and pictures in moderation.** While animations work well for the Cartoon Network, you don't want your audience to focus on the bombs bursting in air and flags waving. Remember, the goal is to transmit information, not lose your message in the glitz. Pictures and audio can help break up the monotony of written words, but use them to enhance your message, instead of letting them become the message.
6. **Thou shalt acknowledge all references used.** Thou shalt not tell a lie or steal someone else's thunder. The same rules of evidence apply with PowerPoint. When you use a quote, table, figure, or summarize someone else's work, cite the source.
7. **Thou shalt surely back up thy presentation.** Save and save often is not just good advice, it should be the law. Remember, it is not "if" technology will fail, it is when; and you must be prepared.
8. **Thou shalt not read the slides word for word.** If all the learner needed to do was read the slide, you would be unemployed. Use the slides as guides for a presentation. Also, don't take the slides right out of the book. Use the slides not only to zero in on important book topics, but to add more material.
9. **Thou shalt not use slides alone.** One or more hours of nothing but talk and PowerPoint slides would bore anyone. Use interactive exercises to address other learning styles. Remember, the mind can only absorb what the butt can endure.
10. **Thou shalt practice.** Don't go in cold and fumble. PowerPoint is only a tool — one you need to use with poise and confidence.
11. **Thou shalt be mindful of learners' limitations.** You are only as powerful as your weakest link, which is usually your learner's technical ability. Remember, many learners will end up printing your notes in black and white. If you have busy backgrounds, lots of color, or poor color choices, your presentation may print but be illegible to the learner. Black and white is preferable for printing purposes. Also, lots of pictures and a large file size may hinder the reader when downloading off the internet. You will want to "plain" it down to reduce file size and make the presentation more easily legible for printing on the home computer. "Dress" it up for presentation in the classroom arena.
12. **Thou shalt allow the listener time to process the slides.** While fast talking makes great commercials, it does not make for effective instruction. Don't put up a slide and then skip over it — that's very confusing. Always allow time for questions, and encourage your learners to ask them. Be sure to determine if your learners understand the concepts you are presenting before moving on. ♥