



Capture the Power, Get to the Point

PowerPoint is a commonly used teaching tool in higher education. Think back to your last professional conference, for example. You probably chose a session based on the topic and had high expectations for learning something new. As the presentation began, you quickly realized the speaker would be using PowerPoint slides as an integral part of the session. Though the content of the presentation may have been innovative, the speaker insisted on reading from a series of slides full of bullet-pointed text. You likely lost interest and spent the rest of the time checking your e-mail. We should reflect on whether this reaction to PowerPoint is common to your students, as well.

A presentation program developed by Microsoft in the 1990s, PowerPoint faces ongoing questions about its value as a teaching tool as suggested by the titles of articles appearing in scholarly journals and popular magazines: “PowerPoint is evil” (Tufte, 2003), “Powerful or pointless?” (James, Burke, & Hutchins, 2006), “Life after death by PowerPoint” (McMillan, 2012), and “Escaping the PowerPoint prison” (Mcfedries, 2017). Additionally, emerging research on its use in presentations should sound an alarm for those who may find using the software in the classroom addictive. Hertz, Kerkhof, and van Woerkum (2016) reported that PowerPoint presenters, on average, included 55 words on each slide and looked at the screen 73 times during a 20-minute presentation. Further, they observed a direct relationship between speaker anxiety and enhanced use of text on PowerPoint slides, concluding that feelings of anxiety and the availability of the text raised speakers’ temptation to read the slides. Further, Hertz et al. (2016) suggested the slides could distract from the speaking part of a presentation.

Pros et al. (2013) took these concerns a step further by examining the impact of PowerPoint presentations on student learning. Students were exposed to course content supplemented by either a PowerPoint presentation or the use of a blackboard. The groups who got their content from the blackboard scored 19% higher than the groups using PowerPoint on a content-related quiz ($p < 0.000$). In a similar study by Meoi et al. (2013), students were taught a collection of content either with PowerPoint, a blackboard, or both. Results indicated the groups taught using both PowerPoint and the blackboard performed significantly higher than the other two groups ($p < .05$). These studies and the negative language applied to PowerPoint raise the question: Can the software rise above these caveats and be a learning resource that supplements and magnifies a presenter’s words?

As a basic principle, any tool or resource that can be used for learning can also be misused, inviting boredom, apathy, and a lack of engagement with presented content.



“ PowerPoint presentations too often resemble a school play — very loud, very slow, and very simple. ”

— Edward Tufte,
emeritus professor
of political science,
statistics, and
computer science,
Yale University

With that in mind, researchers and practitioners have examined how PowerPoint, if used effectively and judiciously, can promote learning. Below are a few of their recommendations. Consider how they align with your use of PowerPoint:

- **Guy Kawasaki's (2005) "10/20/30 Principle"**—Guy Kawasaki has created some simple rules of thumb: Use no more than 10 slides in your presentation (which forces thoughtful decisions about slide content); make sure these 10 slides can supplement 20 minutes' worth of speaking; and use a 30-point font—or find the age of the oldest person in the room, divide by two, and make that your font size.
- **Seth Godin's (Seth's Blog, 2007) rules to remember**—Seth Godin has proposed five key principles for PowerPoint presentations:
 1. No more than six words to a slide;
 2. Make sure your images are of the highest quality;
 3. Resist the temptation to use fancy slide transitions;
 4. Use sound effects on a strategic and limited basis; and
 5. Don't hand out copies of your slides.
- **Bullet points kill interest**—One of the greatest crimes of PowerPoint is relying on bullet points to emphasize the organization and sequence of presented text. Above all, resist this temptation.
- **An agenda, not a script**—Many presenters tend to treat PowerPoint slides as the focus of a presentation as the speaker turns away from the audience to look at the screen or, heaven forbid, reads the slides to the audience. PowerPoint slides should be considered as the agenda, not the focus, for the presentation. That way, the image or (limited number of) words on the screen will help the speaker and the audience transition to the next topic of discussion.
- **The power of imagery**—Richard Mayer (2009) has extensively researched multimedia learning (i.e., which combination of words and imagery best promotes student learning). He suggested that one way that people learn better is with words and pictures rather than words alone. Just as we must be careful about the words we choose, it is equally important to choose images that amplify and connect with the chosen words.
- **Seamless transitions to videos**—One way to enhance a presentation and maintain your audience's attention is by including short video clips (i.e., under three minutes long). This can be done seamlessly by downloading the video to your desktop.
- **"What was the question?"**—When classroom discussions are part of the plan, it is always helpful to post the discussion prompt on a PowerPoint slide to help keep students focused on the task. It is also possible to download timers and embed them into PowerPoint slides. As it makes students aware of the time available for a discussion or assigned task, the timer is a helpful resource.
- **Intentionally blank slides**—For a change of pace, occasionally inserting a blank, black slide can signal that you are about to share something critically important.

Based on these suggested strategies, consider reevaluating your use of PowerPoint in teaching. Focus your energy on harnessing the power of your message, and think of any PowerPoint resources you use as a way to supplement and strengthen what you have to share.



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Online Courses

The National Resource Center offers online courses on topics of interest in higher education. The courses provide participants the same content and opportunities for interaction with peers and the instructor as traditional (i.e., classroom-based) learning environments while taking advantage of pedagogy and teaching techniques that are not possible or common in those settings. The courses use tools such as e-mail, threaded discussions or forums, listservs, and blogs. Enrollment is limited to 25 participants, and attendees will earn 1.5 continuing education units for each course. Visit <http://www.sc.edu/fye/oc> for more information.

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Submission Guidelines for The Toolbox

For complete guidelines and issue dates, see <http://sc.edu/fye/toolbox/submissionguidelines.html>

Audience: *Toolbox* readers include full-time and adjunct faculty; academic advisors; and administrators focused on faculty development, teaching and learning, academic success, and the first college year.

Style: Articles, tables, figures, and references should adhere to APA (American Psychological Association) style.

Length: Original articles should be no longer than 1,500 words. The editor reserves the right to edit submissions for length.

Please address all questions and submissions to:

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Sign up for



Looking for new teaching strategies or fresh ideas for first-year seminars? *E-Source*, the National Resource Center's online newsletter for college transitions, offers a wealth of information. *E-Source* also is accepting submissions for the April 2018 issue. To view the archives, review submission guidelines, and receive content alerts for new issues, please go to www.sc.edu/fye/esource.

Publications

New Members of Editorial Review Board Selected

The National Resource Center, along with Dr. Christina Hardin, editor, is pleased to announce the newest class of Editorial Review Board members for *E-Source for College Transitions*.

Mike Dial, University of South Carolina
 Crystal Edmonds, Robeson Community College
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The review board members serve three-year terms, advising the editor on the suitability of submitted manuscripts for publication in *E-Source* and providing detailed feedback to authors. New board members will be added annually in the spring of each year. For more information about *E-Source* or to learn about the review board member application process, please visit sc.edu/fye/esource or e-mail the editor at ESOURCE@mailbox.sc.edu.

Share Your Strategies for Improving Student Learning

Consider submitting a manuscript for *The Toolbox*. Published six times a year, *The Toolbox* is an electronic newsletter providing practical strategies for student learning and success. Articles on a variety of topics related to teaching and learning are welcome, especially those focusing on:

- faculty–student relationships;
- principles and practices of effective course design;
- active-learning strategies for face-to-face venues;
- applications of digital technology to face-to-face and online venues;
- alternative strategies to assess student learning; and
- strategies and techniques for meeting the learning needs of diverse student populations.

Find complete submission guidelines and more information online at www.sc.edu/fye/toolbox. You can also contact the *Toolbox* editor, Brad Garner, via e-mail at brad.garner@indwes.edu if you have questions about the guidelines or the review process. Submissions are accepted anytime; however, they must be received by **Monday, September 25** to be considered for the November 2017 issue.

National Resource Center Exhibits & Presentations

Like many of you, the staff of the National Resource Center is actively involved in the conference circuit. We are pleased to share the following upcoming opportunity to hear about the results of research studies conducted by the Center, learn about best practices, and meet National Resource Center staff members.

The Stars in the Constellation: Results From the 2017 National Survey of the First-Year Experience. Poster presentation by Dallin George Young, National Resource Center Assistant Director for Research, Grants, and Assessment, at the National Symposium on Student Retention; November 6 – 9, 2017; Destin, Florida.

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The Toolbox

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The Toolbox is an online professional development newsletter offering innovative, learner-centered strategies for empowering college students to achieve greater success. The newsletter is published six times a year by the National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience and Students in Transition at the University of South Carolina, Columbia, South Carolina.

The online subscription is free. To register for newsletter alerts and access back issues, please visit www.sc.edu/fye/toolbox.

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