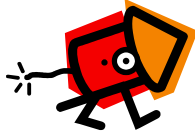


You Don't Have to be a Rocket Scientist



Christina Thorpe
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In recent years, some academics and journalists have argued that PowerPoint presentations make people “stupid”, asserting that the software developed by Microsoft in 1997 may have helped U.S. Secretary of State, Colin Powell, gain support for the invasion of Iraq, may have been the source of the Columbia space shuttle crash, and is to blame for the lackluster presentations given in board rooms from Singapore to Seattle.

Edward Tufte, a professor of information design at Yale University and often referred to as the world's leading guru of information design (Simmons, March 2004), published a book called “The Cognitive Style of PowerPoint,” and an article entitled, “PowerPoint is Evil.” Tufte’s works target PowerPoint as an “assault on intelligence,” (Simmons, March 2004) and calls for the demise of the software program. Tufte’s article specifically argues that PowerPoint discourages free association and creative thinking, contains artificial and misleading hierarchies, makes it difficult for an audience to distinguish relationships, and is full of gross generalizations (Tufte, 2003). He explains further that PowerPoint is the enemy of narrative since it turns everything into a “sales pitch” (Tufte, 2003). A quote by Tad Simmons (March 2004), editor-in-chief of Presentations Magazine, gives us a look at how influential Tufte’s viewpoint is:

It was Tufte who brought NASA's now infamous PowerPoint slide to the public's attention. It was Tufte's work that emboldened *The New York Times* to suggest that information manipulation via electronic slides may have helped Secretary of State Colin Powell make his case to the United Nations for declaring war on Iraq. And it is Tufte, in his 23-page screed who uses such words as *stupid, smarmy, incoherent, witless, medieval* and *dementia* to describe the trivializing effect of PowerPoint slides on pure, defenseless data.

While Tufte raises some very good points regarding the limitations of PowerPoint, most of what he says refers to the Auto Content Wizard, pre-made templates and a bullet point format, all of which are optional tools in PowerPoint (Simmons, March 2004). Cliff Atkinson, an independent management consultant and president of Sociablemedia.com, points out that PowerPoint does not have to be used the way that Tufte describes, and says to think that the software program exercises some sort of punitive, authoritarian power over presenters – a power that can't be resisted – is pure bunk (Simmons, March 2004). Don Norman, a professor of art and design at Northwestern University and author of *The Design of Everyday Things* and *Emotional Design*, is skeptical of Tufte’s argument as well and is quoted as saying:

Tufte is correct in that most talks are horrible and most PowerPoint slides are bad – but that's not PowerPoint's fault. Most writing is awful, too, but I don't go railing against pencils or chalk." (Simmons, March 2004)

Norman’s insinuation that we should focus our energy on improving the skills of the presenter, rather than the shortcomings of the medium, is a viewpoint shared by many in professional and academic communities. Traditional presentation methods using PowerPoint have been challenged and recommendations have been made on how to best deliver a presentation using the software. For example, executives quoted in an article found in the Guardian Newspaper, London, recommend that text be removed from the PowerPoint presentation entirely and replaced with meaningful graphics (Thomas, 2005). Additionally, John Ellwood (2005), a presentation trainer of twelve years, suggests making the presenter the focal point by avoiding bullet points, making eye contact, showing enthusiasm, and involving your audience. In an article published by the New

York Times, a New Jersey high school teacher recommends concentrating on the content rather than the aesthetics of a PowerPoint presentation (Selingo, 2005). As well, a journal article found in The Technology Teacher recommends using custom animation, imbedded Flash movies and hyperlinks to create a better visual experience (Deal, 2005).

Good presentation skills mean analyzing your audience, refining your message, and using the medium of your choice effectively (Aziz, 2003). To lay full blame on a software package for the inadequacy of professional presentations is unwarranted. The medium, the message, and the messenger are inextricably linked...multimedia technology is the neutral part of this information equation (Simmons, September 2004).

As for PowerPoint causing the Columbia space shuttle crash, it seems that the Columbia Accident Investigation Board put it into perspective when they dedicated an entire page of their report, blaming the **CULTURE** of NASA for using PowerPoint in place of rigorous technical analysis (Marcus, 2005). After all, you don't have to be a rocket scientist to figure out that the way you tell a story is as important as the story itself.

Annotated Bibliography

Aziz, Khalid. (2003). *Effective communication: The key to successful leadership*. Development and Learning in Organizations, 17(5), 7-9. Retrieved on September 13th, 2005 from Emerald Insight Online Journals.

Khalid Aziz, chairman of the Aziz Corporation, shares his professional view on what makes communication effective and argues that anyone can become a more proficient speaker by addressing three key elements: message, audience and medium. Aziz applies his view to a case study about an executive with poor communication skills who was alienating his colleagues and clients. After receiving communication training (provided by Aziz Corporation), the executive had developed more successful business relationships which increased productivity.

Deal, Walter F. III. (2005, May/June). *Presentation Software: Another Look*. The Technology Teacher, 64(8), 12-16. Retrieved on September 20th, 2005 from FirstSearch online database.

Walter F. Deal, III, Ph.D. is an associate professor at Old Dominion University in Norfolk, VA, who discusses the fact that technology teachers and students rely heavily on PowerPoint. He argues that visual materials help an audience retain more information, although he references two dated studies to substantiate his claim. Deal offers ways to create a "successful" PowerPoint presentation by including video clips, flash movies, tutorials and games.

Ellwood, John. (2005). *Presence or PowerPoint*. Development and Learning in Organizations, 19(3), 12-14. Retrieved September 15th, 2005 from Emerald Insight Online Journals.

A narrative about a business man and woman talking about a PowerPoint presentation that was given with the intent of confusing the audience and ultimately getting them to agree to anything. Ellwood, Director of 3E Training Ltd., gives his opinion on what not to do with the software and some pointers on how to enhance the presentation experience by putting presence before PowerPoint.

Ferguson, Kevin. (2004, March). *Reinventing the PowerPoint*. Inc, 26(3), 42. Retrieved on September 20th, 2005 from FirstSearch online database.

Ferguson discusses new software that can be coupled with PowerPoint to make self-running, downloadable "webinars" with overlaid recorded narrations and full digital and audio capability. The software also includes reporting capabilities to keep track of who actually "watched" the presentation.

- Giffen, Peter. (2005, May/June). *Power to the Presentation*. *Applied Arts*, 20(3), 32-4, 36. Retrieved on September 20th, 2005 from FirstSearch online database.
A journal article that touches on the reasons why PowerPoint fails and points out that designers who have made names for themselves have worked effectively within the limitations and have pushed the boundaries of the software, creating media rich presentations.
- Marcus, Ruth. (2005, September 1). Did PowerPoint make the space shuttle crash? *The Union Leader*, pp. A11. Retrieved on September 13, 2005 from Lexis-Nexis online database.
Ruth Marcus, a journalist for The Union Leader, gives her opinion on the troubles with PowerPoint, supporting Edward Tufte's view that the software should be banned since she agrees that it played a role in the Columbia space shuttle crash. Interestingly, Marcus also quotes Columbia's Accident Investigation Board in which it criticized the space agency culture for using PowerPoint in place of rigorous technical analysis.
- Selingo, Jeffery. (2005, August 3). From Early On, Multimedia Rules. *New York Times*, pp. G8. Retrieved September 20th, 2005 from Lexis-Nexis online database.
A newspaper article that focuses on PowerPoint and other multimedia tools being used by students as young as 7 years old. Some teachers interviewed in this article argued that using PowerPoint allows the students to exercise their knowledge base and equips them with the skills needed to feel comfortable giving oral presentations. Other teachers contend that the students are focusing too much on the aesthetics of the presentation rather than the content.
- Simmons, Tad. (2004, March). *Does PowerPoint make you stupid?* Retrieved on September 13th, 2005 from Presentations.com Web site:
http://www.presentations.com/presentations/delivery/article_display.jsp?vnu_content_id=1000482464
Editor-in-chief of Presentations magazine disputes Edward Tufte's view that PowerPoint is "evil". Simmons does not deny that the software is problematic, but is convinced that "stupid" presentations stem from a lack of logic and lack of rhetorical design and skill. He believes that Tufte's views are unsubstantiated and self-serving.
- Simmons, Tad. (2004, September). *The Multimedia Paradox*. Retrieved on September 13th, 2005 from Presentations.com Web site:
http://www.presentations.com/presentations/search/article_display.jsp?vnu_content_id=1000734183
Simmons explores the relentless search by professional and academics to quantify the fact that multimedia improves learning outcomes, and since trying to conduct such a study through Presentations magazine, has realized the difficulty in trying to do so. Based on the research of what he calls "one of the most scientifically rigorous books available on the subject", Simmons agrees that the medium, the messenger and the message are inextricably linked, therefore making it difficult to prove the learning outcomes of multimedia.

Thomas, Kim. (2005, March 21). Office Hours: Point of No Return. *The Guardian*, London, Guardian Office Hours Pages, p. 5. Retrieved September 20th, 2005 from Lexis-Nexis online database.

An opinion piece that discusses the “horrors” of PowerPoint presentations, calling the software “ubiquitous, allowing too many people to commit too many crimes.” She interviews business professionals who offer suggestions on how to build a better presentation.

Tufte, Edward. (2003, September). *PowerPoint Is Evil*. Retrieved on September 15th, 2005 from Wired magazine Web site:

<http://www.wired.com/wired/archive/11.09/ppt2.html>

Edward Tufte, a professor of information design at Yale University and often referred to as the world's leading guru of information design, strongly argues that PowerPoint shows lack of respect for a speaker's audience and has become the presentation rather than a supplement for it. He says the “pushy” style of PowerPoint seeks to set the speaker's dominance over the audience and it limits understanding of context and evaluation of relationships. He is concerned about students being taught how to pitch a presentation to a client rather than writing an essay.