

# END POWERPOINT DEPENDENCY NOW!

- **Ease off the slides and**
- **improve your presentations**
- **at ALA or any other library conference**

■ **by Steven J. Bell**

I'm convinced that our profession's love affair with PowerPoint is stronger than ever. At the past three library conferences I attended, virtually every presentation by a librarian involved PowerPoint slides.

On the other hand, nearly every keynote presenter or invited speaker (almost always non librarians) made little or no use of PowerPoint. Granted, keynotes differ considerably from research-based presentations, but these speakers connected with their audiences effortlessly.

The library profession seems oblivious to the global backlash against PowerPoint. Several articles over the past three years have led the movement against the dependence on slides as presentation standards. With titles such as "Ban It Now: Friends Don't Let Friends Use PowerPoint," "PowerPoint-Induced Sleep," and "Is PowerPoint the Devil?" the articles detail the same behaviors demonstrated at library conferences that lead to static, dull, audience-alienating presentations.

Edward Tufte's *The Cognitive Style of PowerPoint* (Graphics Press, 2003) generated further backlash against PowerPoint recently. Tufte's goal was to encourage presentations that are clearer, more useful, and more powerful, but he thoroughly illustrates how PowerPoint sabotages well-intentioned presentations. Tufte's Ask E.T. weblog ([www.edwardtufte.com/bboard/](http://www.edwardtufte.com/bboard/)) offers anecdotes about bad PowerPoint presentations.

The running theme of all these publications is that PowerPoint rarely enhances a presentation. Instead, it facilitates poorly designed communication graphics and can ultimately detract from a speaker's ability to connect with the audience.



Short of declaring an absolute ban on PowerPoint slides at our conferences, what can be done? As a PowerPoint

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user myself—and one who is likely guilty of those offenses condemned by anti-PowerPoint advocates—I still believe that PowerPoint slides can add value to a program. As in all things, moderation is the key.

But PowerPoint users must also pay attention to the importance of visual and graphic design in communication. Unfortunately, most librarians lack familiarity with these skill areas. In this article, I offer a few suggestions on how our profession can reduce its dependency on PowerPoint, or at least make sure our use of it enhances, rather than weakens, our presentations.

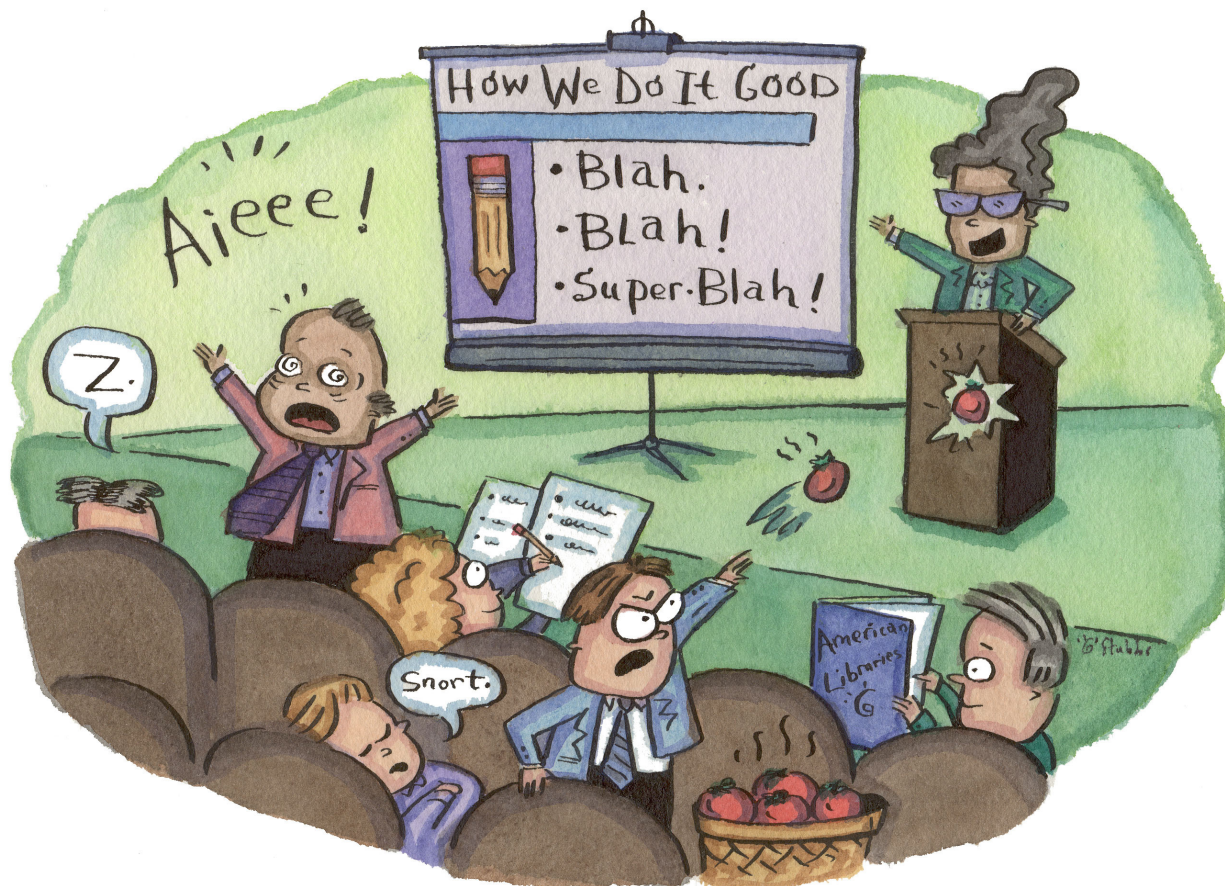
## *Go live or simulate it*

Internet connections have improved vastly in the last few years. With dependable connectivity increasingly the norm, let's raise our expectations for live, dynamic presentations. Instead of giving the audience bullet points to explain why your library decided to implement a new web-based technology solution, provide a live demonstration that speaks for itself and excites your audience.

And please don't linger over several dozen PowerPoint slides only to rush through the most interesting portion of your presentation in the last five minutes. Start with a clear, visually informative demonstration that will allow attendees to make better sense of the rest of your remarks. Show the audience exactly what you are talking about.

Speakers who have qualms about going live during a presentation should think about providing a canned demonstration. A number of software products allow you to capture complete or partial web pages that can be used to simulate live connections or at least show the audience what's being discussed. While Web browsers can manage basic web-page capture, more sophisticated software such as CatchTheWeb ([www.catchtheweb.com](http://www.catchtheweb.com)) can turn a series of screens into a presentation so elegant the audience won't know if it's live or canned.

Even diehard PowerPoint enthusiasts can use LiveWeb ([www.mvps.org/skp/liveweb.htm](http://www.mvps.org/skp/liveweb.htm)), a free utility that painlessly captures current web pages and content



into PPT slides. Live is better, because it allows for spontaneous innovation and responses to “what if” scenarios. Compared to the linear, start-to-finish predictability of PowerPoint, going live or simulating it can make a presentation truly dynamic.

Instead of serving up the usual series of bullet-point slides, try to integrate more “web evidence,” or “webidence” for short. For example, suppose you want to make a point about the way students increasingly use the Internet for their research. Instead of a PowerPoint slide that reduces the key findings from a national study of student Internet use to bullet points, locate articles found on websites that support your point. Possible sources in this case might include an actual Pew Research Center study that reported this data or a web page from a college newspaper with a story on the topic.

It can be far more powerful and effective to show the audience the evidence as you make a case in support of your presentation. This is where web-page capture software such as Net Snippets ([www.netsnippets.com](http://www.netsnippets.com)) is most helpful. If you come across a web page containing information that could be relevant to an upcoming or future presentation, capture it immediately. Delay even a week and you may find that the page no longer exists.

Should we dare to go retro-tech, low-tech, or no-tech?

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Walt Crawford, a sought-after keynote speaker and *American Libraries* columnist, makes no secret of his preference for avoiding PowerPoint. In his book *First Have Something to Say* (ALA Editions, 2003), he advises the reader to avoid leaning on PowerPoint as a crutch. If Crawford can succeed without PowerPoint, why shouldn't more of us be following suit?

In a recent thread on Tufte's Ask E.T. weblog, one respondent recalled that the best presenter he ever experienced simply used a continuous roll of transparency film on an overhead projector. This old technology allowed the presenter to jot down thoughts and talking points as they occurred and in reaction to audience questions and comments. What a refreshing experience that would be, assuming you could find such a device at a convention center.

Transparencies, 35mm slides, and other low-tech approaches are all potential visual aids, but you might consider talking without AV. It would certainly depend on your topic, but just think how dynamic this could be. If you need convincing, think of the best presenter or presentation you've ever experienced. Do you remember any content on the slides or what template was used? Or do you remember the dynamic speaking style of the presenter? Did

PowerPoint or the speaker's visual technology make it memorable? Probably not.

### *If you must PPT*

It would be unrealistic to expect the entire profession to stop cold turkey. So when you do use PowerPoint slides, consider some of the following suggestions:

**Keep the number of slides to a minimum.** As a guideline, create no more than 10 substantive slides (a cover slide does not count) per hour of presentation. If you assume four to five minutes of speaking per slide, 10 would consume nearly all of an hour-long presentation with only a short time for discussion.

It always spells trouble for the audience when the presentation begins in slide mode and the slides total 30–40 or more.

In those situations, the speaker rarely has time to get through them all, so some important information is skipped. If a speaker chooses to exceed the 10-slide maximum, no slide should remain up for more than two or three minutes. Few things contribute to a static presentation like slides that persist for more than a few minutes. Remember: With fewer bullet points to cover, you'll have more opportunity to talk, and that's why the attendees are really there—to hear what you have to say.

**Avoid PowerPoint templates that are used to death** (for example, Blends, High Voltage, Notebook). It's actually quite simple to design your own template style or visit sites that offer new and different templates for downloading. While you're at it, consider customizing your slides with the name or theme of the conference. Let attendees know you took the time to think about your slides. For example, the PowerPoint slide master makes it simple to apply a style feature or graphic once and have it appear on every slide.

**Unless it's absolutely necessary, spare the audience details about your library.** I attended a program where the speaker had only 20 minutes to present. Almost half of this was used to provide unnecessary details on multiple slides about her library's programs, the institution's student body, faculty, technology infrastructure, and more. It's true that speakers gain confidence by starting with familiar information that's easily recalled, and at times this information can add context to the talk. But keep it brief, and limit it to just one slide. Even better, start with the demonstration or show how your service operates, then work a few points about your library or institution into the opening sequence. That could eliminate one or more slides right away.

**Resist the urge to supply everyone with a printout of all your slides at the start of the program.** The focal

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point of any presentation is the speaker. When handouts are available, the audience focuses on the text and jumps ahead to see what the speaker will be saying next. If you create slides or other forms of electronic visual support and want to make them available to attendees for later review, put them on a website. I do advocate supplying attendees with a presentation handout. It should contain on a single page the speaker's contact information, a list of related readings or web resources, and the URL where the presentation visuals can be viewed. This can be distributed at the start of the program without compromising what the speaker has to say. If a complete set of slide printouts is required, save the distribution for the end of the program.

There are dozens more tips for improving slide presentations (don't read from the slides, keep the text consistent, avoid meaningless clip art on every slide, limit the bullet points to three or four per slide, practice and time the presentation in advance), but this article is intended to encourage you to stop or reduce your use of PowerPoint. Using such tips merely makes the problems less noticeable. For further advice on improving the quality of PowerPoint presentations, visit [staff.philau.edu/bells/ppt.html](http://staff.philau.edu/bells/ppt.html).

Few of us are natural presenters. We need to gain experience and build confidence. For some it comes at local conferences, while others hone presentation skills during library-instruction sessions. More national library conferences could benefit from offering instructional workshops for speakers, especially those with limited presentation experience. ALA's Association of College and Research Libraries is a good model, as it offers just such a workshop at the ALA Midwinter Meeting prior to its own national conference (even if a significant portion of the program is devoted to creating effective PowerPoint presentations). If you've been selected to give a presentation at a library conference, consider a speaker's workshop if you're new to presenting.

If no such workshop is available, then take advantage of the myriad web resources devoted to helping individuals improve their presentation skills. But none of these sites will likely provide the encouragement you need to declare your freedom from PowerPoint. If you need such motivation, take time to read the literature that identifies and discusses the symptoms and causes of "PowerPoint-lessness." Then imagine your program without PowerPoint. Chances are you will be improving on your ability to achieve every speaker's ultimate objective—creating a memorable conference experience for your audience. ❖