



The Top Ten Do's And Don'ts for CLE PowerPoint Presentations

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Will your audience learn, or squirm? It partly depends on how you handle the slides.

INTRODUCTION

Any continuing legal education speaker should seriously consider adding some form of visual aid to his or her presentation. Usually this means PowerPoint. A visual accompaniment makes any presentation more interesting. An audience often learns more through a multimedia presentation than from a pure lecture. If you use PowerPoint, here are some suggestions on how best to do it.

DON'T LET YOUR PRESENTATION BURY YOUR CONTENT

Don't let the technology of PowerPoint steal your show. With PowerPoint, you can add hundreds of "bells and whistles" to

your presentation. Don't try to use them all. Don't even try to use very many. Remember, your goal is to communicate knowledge and information. You need your audience's attention. If your audience pays more attention to your PowerPoint technology than to the substance of your topic, you will probably miss your goal. PowerPoint slides should complement your speech, not replace your presentation or the handouts.

DO BE CONSISTENT

The use of too many fonts, varying colors, or changing slide formats will distract your audience. Keep your slides consistent. This does not mean you must avoid using photographs and other graphic content. Those

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elements, like occasional humor, will help keep your audience focused and interested. But keep the special features under control.

DO USE “AUDIENCE-FRIENDLY” COLORS

Colors have connotations. The colors you use will have varying effects on your audience. Red is usually bad, because of its negative and hostile connotations (red lights, emergency vehicles, stop signs, etc.). Blue is professional, serious, and calm (blue sky, ocean). Green is friendly, relaxed, and safe (money, green lights). PowerPoint’s predefined color schemes are usually good. For more on this topic, and others in this article, see the materials on Microsoft’s PowerPoint home page.

DO USE READABLE FONTS

You want your audience to be able to read your presentation. Make the words on the screen large, dark, and clear enough so your audience can read them without squinting or struggling. A slide that you can read easily three feet from your computer screen may be illegible from the back of a ballroom. Try to use at least a 24-point font, never less than 18-point. Fonts come in two groups: “serif” fonts, which have short strokes at the end of each longer stroke of a letter (e.g., Times New Roman, Courier New, Garamond and Bookman Old Style); and “sans serif” fonts, which don’t (e.g., Arial, Tahoma, and Century Gothic). Serif fonts are easier to read. Try to use them for text. Sans serif fonts are more modern and are often used for titles and headings. Don’t use script or decorative fonts very much, because they are hard to read. Think of them as artwork—a little bit goes a long way.

DO KEEP IT BRIEF

Don’t crowd your slides. Try to limit each to seven lines of text, including your title. Try to limit each line to eight words. Anything on a PowerPoint slide will look more overwhelming and complicated—not simpler and easier to understand—when blown up on a screen in the front of a room above the heads of your audience.

DO BEWARE OF TRANSITIONS

PowerPoint offers you dozens of cute “transitions” to move from one slide to another. As is so often true, more is not better! Some speakers seem to think that if one type of transition is neat, ten different types of transitions will be awesome. In fact, different types of transition are distracting. Stay with one or two nondistracting transitions. The “wipe up” transition, for example, is popular and unobtrusive. Or don’t bother with transitions at all. Just go from one slide to the next. Your audience won’t miss the transitions, or even notice they’re gone.

DO USE HIGH-CONTRAST COLORS

You’ve probably seen it more than once: an incredibly insightful and brilliant PowerPoint presentation that no one can read on the screen because the text does not stand out from the background. Without a doubt, whoever wrote the presentation could read it easily on a desktop computer screen. Projection onto a 20-foot ballroom screen—about 400 times larger—is, however, entirely different. Many people have some form of color deficiency in their eyesight. As people age, their eyesight worsens. Black writing on a dark blue background, projected on a large screen, is virtually unreadable for many. Choose colors that contrast. White on dark blue works well. Other good choices are black on

white (like your newspaper), white on dark green (road signs), and yellow on blue.

DON'T READ YOUR PRESENTATION

We've all seen this one also. The speaker types his or her entire outline or speaking notes, word by word, on PowerPoint slides, then gives the speech by reading each slide word by word and, perhaps, sometimes turning to the screen to read those words. This insults the audience, because the audience can read the speaker's notes as well as the speaker can. The audience doesn't particularly need the speaker's help; in fact, the speaker serves no real purpose at all. Also, turning away from the audience is distracting and not an effective way to communicate. Your slides should add to your speech and help your audience follow what you are saying, not duplicate it or replace you. Only extremely rarely, if at all, should you ever read the text of any slide to your audience.

DO DISTRIBUTE A HANDOUT

Print out your PowerPoint presentation on paper (in "handout" format, three slides per page). Make copies for everyone in your audience. They will appreciate being able to follow along with your presentation and being able to take notes in the margins. Once you print out your presentation, though, you can't keep editing it, so make sure it's correct and final, well in advance.

DO TRY TO BE "PANEL CONSISTENT"

If you are part of a panel—particularly if all the panelists' topics are related—you may want to have all the panelists coordinate their PowerPoint presentations into a single consistent and consolidated presentation. This can be hard, of course,

because it requires coordination. But it can produce at least two advantages. First, it minimizes the disruption and waste of time that can occur every time a speaker tries to start his or her PowerPoint program. Second, it saves the audience the trouble of trying to understand the format of each new speaker's slides. (Others argue that the differences in format help keep the audience awake and distinguish the speakers, and any competent PowerPoint user should be able to launch a presentation with no great delay.)

MAYBE BRING UP ONE ITEM AT A TIME

You may want to bring your points onto the slide one at a time (one bullet point, then the next, etc.). If you display a whole slide on the screen at once, your audience may read ahead of you and stop listening. You may also want to "gray out" points you have covered, leaving your current point as the only one highlighted. Whatever sequencing technique you use, don't set it to run automatically. The timing will always turn out wrong.

A GRACEFUL ENDING

Pay attention to how your presentation ends. You may want to create an "end title" slide, simply repeating the title of your presentation.

PLAN YOUR LOGISTICS

Ask your hosts in advance if they will provide a computer, or if they expect you to bring your own. If the former, will their version of PowerPoint be able to read yours? Do they expect you to have your presentation on a floppy disk? A CD-Rom? Tell your hosts where you plan to sit when you speak. Ask them to provide a

video hookup (“VGA”) cord long enough to accommodate your plans, and an extra bulb for their projector for use if needed.

PRACTICE, PRACTICE, PRACTICE

A PowerPoint presentation that looks great on your computer does not necessarily look as great on a large screen in a lighted ballroom. This is especially true if you aren't totally comfortable with PowerPoint, and you need to figure out its nuances for the first time in front of your audience. Test your presentation and your PowerPoint skills in advance. Use a real projector and a

real screen in a real conference room—with the lights on. Make sure your presentation is readable and it looks right on the screen and you know how to run it. Check your colors, contrasts, and font sizes. Walk to the back of the room and try to read your presentation yourself. If you are using a wireless mouse, practice using it before your presentation. If you are using a laser pointer, practice using it before your presentation. Long before your presentation begins, go to the room where you will speak. Make sure all the equipment is set up just the way you want it, and works.