



Creating Effective Presentation Slides

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When attending a conference, scientists are typically exposed to hundreds of slides, most of which are highly ineffective. Here's how to make your slides a powerful component of a successful presentation.

Who among us has never had to sit through a boring presentation and endure a long sequence of similar-looking slides cluttered with busy graphs, large tables, detailed equations, complex diagrams or endless bulleted lists—not to mention aggressive background images, irrelevant clip art and asphyxiating corporate branding?

Audiences around the world, from first-year students to seasoned professionals, already have a sense of what, above all else, makes for ineffective slides: too much stuff on them—in particular too much text. Why is it, then, that these same people would create equally poor slides when they need to prepare presentations themselves? I see at least three reasons.

First—and I've heard quite a few presenters confess to it—many of us are really creating slides as a memory aid for

ourselves and not a visual support for the audience. If you feel you need notes

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to remember what to say, go ahead and create some. But do with these notes what you've always done with your cheat sheets: Keep them to yourself.

Second, many professionals in the corporate world attempt to create slides

that double as a written report. Needless to say, they miss both objectives: The slides typically include too much detail to be effective and too little to serve as a thorough report. If you need a written document in addition to slides, write one.

Third, and most common, many presenters create slides in a hurry, mostly by copying and pasting selected text and illustrations from written documents. Often aware of the poor result of this exercise, these presenters are quick to justify it through lack of time: "Look, I know these are not very good slides but, hey, they're better than nothing, right?"

Slides are optional

Let me make one thing perfectly clear: Ineffective slides are *worse* than nothing—because they distract from what

the presenter is saying. So commit to doing your slides right, or don't do any slides at all. Presenters who have little time to prepare (and many of us fit this profile) would be better off focusing on more important tasks, such as planning the presentation, structuring its content and practicing its delivery.

We probably all remember great presentations that did not rely on slides; I certainly do, and on technical topics, too. In contrast, a presentation is unlikely to be effective if it is not well planned, well structured and well delivered. There lie the priorities. Slides are optional.

Slides can be powerful

Of course, when well designed, slides are a powerful presentation aid. At their most effective, they each get a message across on their own, unambiguously, yet without distracting from the spoken content. If audience members miss the presenter's spoken point for any reason, they should be able to get it by taking one look at the screen. Conversely, if they miss the point on a slide, they should be able to get it by listening to the presenter. This redundancy between the two channels is a solid strategy toward compensating for unavoidable transmission losses. For it to work well, the two channels should interfere constructively and not detract from one another: Looking at a slide should not prevent the audience from listening to the presenter at the same time.

A simple way to check whether your slides stand on their own is to submit them to a test viewer, such as a friend or colleague. Refrain from giving any explanation and ask your viewer to let you know, for each slide, whether both the *what* and the *so what* are clear. If he or she cannot figure out what an illustration is (the *what*), you must clarify it, perhaps by adding labels. If he or she cannot figure out what you are trying

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slideware. Work out your story first—on paper. Once you have identified your main message, decide how you can best support it with two to five main points. Then see how you can develop each main point in two to five subpoints. Next, turn each subpoint into a statement: a complete sentence (subject and predicate) expressing what you want your audience to understand about and remember from that subpoint. Prune each of these statements down to 12–15 words or less. Now, and only now, you are ready to start creating slides.

Slides are for conveying messages

With each slide, strive to get one message across. State the message in the title of the slide. This message is the short statement you have prepared for that subpoint: a complete sentence expressing the *so what*, not a noun phrase describing *what* is on the slide. Make sure it fits on a maximum of two lines at a reasonably large font size (alternatively, choose the font size so titles can routinely accommodate 12–15 words on two lines); if it is too long, prune further, possibly by moving some items of information to the rest of the slide, but keep a complete sentence. Then develop this message on the rest of the slide, as visually as possible. If you think you need both text items and a graph, for example, make the graph central. That is, do not add the graph to illustrate the text, as you would in a written document; instead, use the text to clarify the graph. Whatever you include, focus

to tell your audience with this illustration (the *so what*), you must clarify your point, typically both in the slide's title and on the illustration.

The first step toward creating effective slides in a reasonable amount of time is actually to *delay* the moment you move to PowerPoint or other

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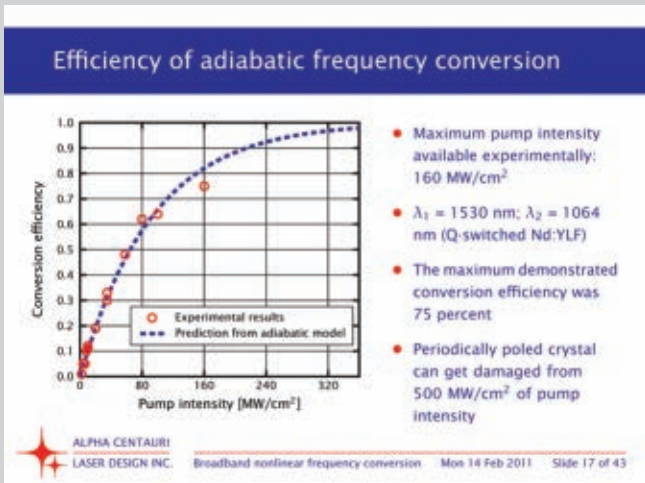
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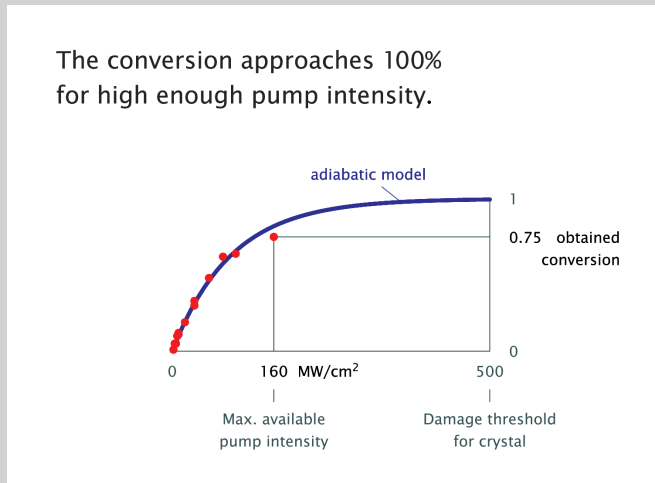
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A poor slide

Although constructed with care, this slide is ineffective. The title conveys the *what*, not the *so what*, and it is not visually inviting to read because of the blue box. The graph is sub-optimal, with its separate legend, a less-than-intuitive horizontal scale, too many values along the vertical scale, an unnecessary grid, hollow data markers, a dashed data line and a vertical label. Bulleted items lack parallelism in both content (they do not make up a true list) and form (some are sentences, some are not). The logo and footer contain information that can be useful on a title slide but is unnecessary on every slide. (For example, the audience need not be reminded of today's date throughout the presentation.)



A more effective slide

This revised version of the previous slide gets the message across more effectively, even for audience members who have missed what the presenter said. The title states this message (the *so what*), as a full sentence. The graph now gives prominence to the data, with scales limited to the values of interest. Horizontally, it has been extended to the damage threshold, to show the range of pump intensity available with a conversion close to 100 percent (which is what this slide's message is about). The text items are now directly connected to the graph, too. For visual clarity, the logo, footer and incidental information have been omitted altogether.

on conveying the message (the *so what*) stated in the slide's title.

Once you believe you have expressed the right message in the slide's title and you've selected the right content to support this message visually, optimize your slide further. In a word, strive for conciseness, both verbally and visually: Remove absolutely everything you can spare. Slides are a heavily constrained medium, and good visual design requires space—lots of it—so make space. Remove any fancy background, footer and needless colors. Eliminate any logos on all but the first slide and perhaps the last. Remove any top-level bullets, separation lines and emphasis frames; make text, arrows and other

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items plain, without embellishments. In graphs, reveal the data above all else; remove excess tick marks, grid lines, meaningless 3-D effects or color gradients. In the end, the only thing the audience can pay attention to is the intended message and supporting evidence; everything else is gone.

Adding items on a slide is easy; removing them is hard. But eliminating any possible distraction from your slides makes all the difference. If you need an incentive, let me recommend my "M&M's method": As you prepare to revise your slides, place a bowl of M&M's candies next to you. Every time you remove an item (a word, color, logo, etc.) from a slide without losing information, reward yourself with one piece of candy. At future OSA conferences, I am thus hoping for lean slides ... and plump presenters. ▲

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