



Six Minutes Speaking and Presentation Skills

Your guide to be a confident and effective speaker

Article Category: [Visual Aids](#)

Slide Title Guidelines: Use Assertions, Not Topics

by [Andrew Dlugan](#)

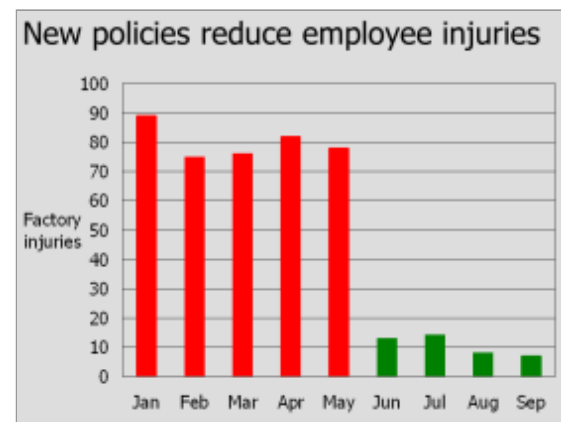
Quick... think back to the last slide presentation you attended.

- What kind of titles were used on the slides?
- Do you remember any of them?
- Were there titles like "Background", "Research Study", "October Sales", and "Conclusions"?

If you are nodding to that last question (and most people reading this will be), you already know that most slide titles are pretty mundane: they are quickly written and quickly forgotten.

It doesn't have to be that way. **Slide titles can help communicate your message**, and set the context of the slide for your audience.

In this article, we discuss **five simple guidelines** you can use to quickly improve your slides, and see how these guidelines apply to **slide examples**.



Slide Title Guidelines

These guidelines are easy to follow. Once you are aware of them, you will find that they are almost second nature.

Slide Design Series

- Articles
 - **Slide Titles**
 - [Slide Fonts](#)
 - [Slide Charts](#)

1. **Slide titles should convey your main point as an assertion.**

Avoid using topics or labels as titles such as “Background”, “Research Study”, “Sales”, and “Conclusions”. Titles like this are weak and do little to help your audience understand the slide. Titles written as clear assertions provide meaning for your audience which is elaborated upon with the visual in the body of the slide (chart, photograph, diagram, table, etc.) and also with your verbal delivery.

2. **Slide titles should be crisp, not wordy.**

Titles should fit on one line (or, at most two lines). Spend the time to distill the essential meaning into a short, clear statement.

3. **Slide titles should be larger than any other text on the slide.**

In every medium where text is present, size conveys importance. (Think of posters, newspapers, books, reports, and even web pages like this one.) Large text is perceived as more important than small text. Since your slide title conveys your main point, you should make it the largest text on the slide. (I typically use 44 point text for titles.)

4. **Slide titles should be consistently located.**

In English and other left-to-right languages, the best place for the title is in the upper-left of the slide. That’s where your audience will glance first, before exploring the rest of the slide. If you choose to go against this guideline, be sure the benefits outweigh the drawbacks. (Beware placing title text along the bottom of a slide. In many presentation venues, your audience will have difficulty seeing the bottom edge of your slides due to heads of people in front of them.)

5. **Slide titles should be easy to read.**

Don’t make your audience struggle. Use a clean font and a color with strong contrast so your title can be read and understood at a glance.

- [Rule of Thirds \(Layout\)](#)
- [Contrast, Repetition, Alignment, Proximity](#)
- Book Reviews
 - [Slide:ology](#)
 - [Presentation Zen](#)
 - [Clear and to the Point](#)

If you follow the guidelines above, your audience will understand the purpose of the slide. This will help them as they view and study the evidence you have provided to support the assertion in the body of the slide.

Exceptions to the Guidelines

Like nearly all speaking guidelines, there are exceptions. In this case, there are many situations where you can safely ignore one or more of the guidelines above:

- title slides, agenda slides, transition slides, housekeeping slides;
- quotation slides (the main idea *is* the quotation, and so a separate title is rarely helpful);

“Slide titles should convey your main point as an assertion.”

- setup slides which are employed as part of a sequence (e.g. the first slide might pose a problem or ask a rhetorical question, while the follow-up slide may have the solution as an assertion);
- artistic slides; and
- any other slide where a title is not warranted or perhaps even detrimental

Further, the guidelines above don't apply if you are using an irregular presentation format, such as [the Lessig Method](#).

These guidelines do, however, apply to the majority of normal "body" slides that are used in business, scientific, and classroom presentations. In most cases, if your slide has a title, it should follow the guidelines.

Proponents of Assertion Slide Titles

Michael Alley and Melissa Marshall offer [comprehensive coverage](#) of the benefits of assertions for slide titles. They have conducted **research studies** which show that students perform better after receiving presentations designed using the assertion-evidence method (as compared to traditional "topic"-titled slides). Their site also includes [resources for instructors](#) who teach this approach to slide design.

Olivia Mitchell [provides](#) an accessible overview of the assertion-evidence style.

Cliff Atkinson, author of [Beyond Bullet Points](#):

Writing headlines in the form of complete sentences imposes a discipline on your ideas by forcing you to turn them into coherent thoughts and remove any ambiguity. [...]

The point of the headline is to help your audience understand your point as efficiently as possible.

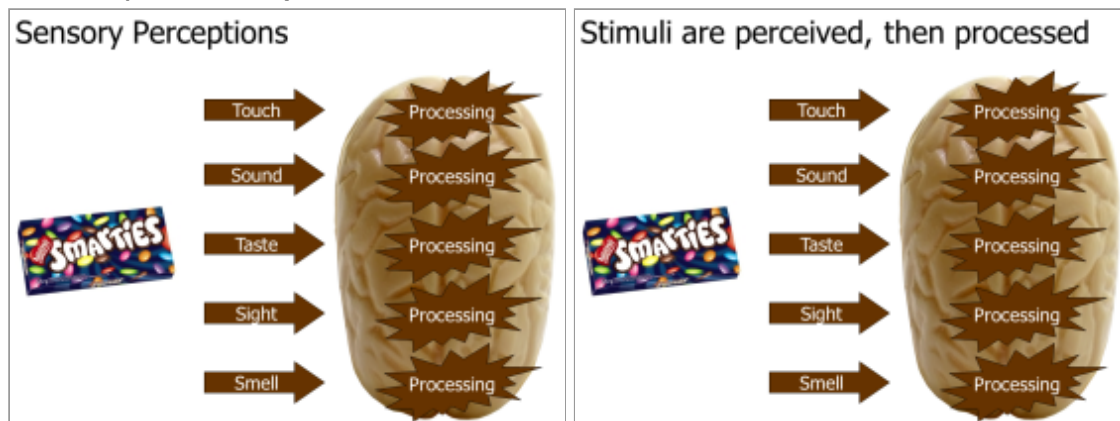
Slide Examples

Below I've given seven pairs of slides (taken from my PowerPoint design course), where the only difference is the slide title.

- The left slide uses a "topic" or "label" title.
- The right slide uses an assertion for a title to convey the primary meaning to the audience.

Slide Example #1

- The title on the left ("Sensory Perceptions") is the topic being discussed.
- However, the title on the right makes the two-step process much clearer (stimuli must be [1] perceived and then [2] processed)



Slide Example #2

- The title on the left adds no value. The slide is obviously about text sizes.
- The title on the right emphasizes the key takeaway — that text readability is a critical factor to consider.

Text Size on Slides			Make text large enough to read		
1	ZSHC	44	1	ZSHC	44
2	CP140	40	2	CP140	40
3	HSKRNI	36	3	HSKRNI	36
4	CHKRVD	32	4	CHKRVD	32
5	HONSDCV	28	5	HONSDCV	28
6	OKHDNRCS	24	6	OKHDNRCS	24
7	VHDNKUOSRC	20	7	VHDNKUOSRC	20
8	NAGULDWERDNA	18	8	NAGULDWERDNA	18
9	BDCLZWVYIHSROA	16	9	BDCLZWVYIHSROA	16
10	AREYOUREYESSOREYET	14	10	AREYOUREYESSOREYET	14
11	THISISWAYWAYTOOSMALL	12	11	THISISWAYWAYTOOSMALL	12
12	ATTHISPOINTYOUAREBEING SILLY	10	12	ATTHISPOINTYOUAREBEING SILLY	10
13	FOUNTAINSPRINGSBARTLETTREVIEW	8	13	FOUNTAINSPRINGSBARTLETTREVIEW	8
14	FOUNTAINSPRINGSBARTLETTREVIEW	6	14	FOUNTAINSPRINGSBARTLETTREVIEW	6
15	FOUNTAINSPRINGSBARTLETTREVIEW	4	15	FOUNTAINSPRINGSBARTLETTREVIEW	4
16	FOUNTAINSPRINGSBARTLETTREVIEW	2	16	FOUNTAINSPRINGSBARTLETTREVIEW	2

Slide Example #3

- The title on the left is a weak topic, but leaves the audience wondering: is it good to decorate your text or not?
- The title on the right is a forceful assertion that is reinforced by the slide evidence.

Font Decorations

Underlining crops letters: gjpqy

Word Art may be PowerPoint's worst "feature"

Shadows add little, but cost much

Can you **read this?** **Or this?** **Or this?**

Don't reduce readability gratuitously

Underlining crops letters: gjpqy

Word Art may be PowerPoint's worst "feature"

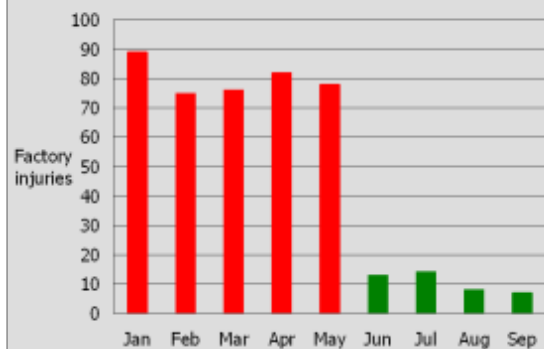
Shadows add little, but cost much

Can you **read this?** **Or this?** **Or this?**

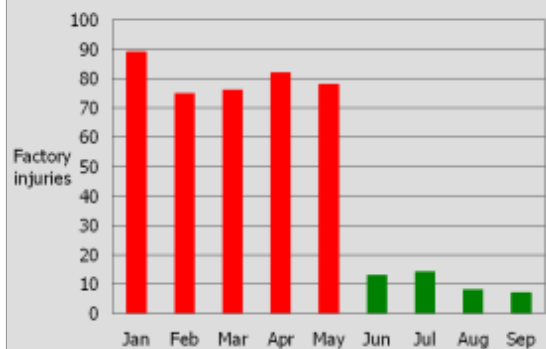
Slide Example #4

- The title on the left describes what is being charted. That's helpful, but is something that the presenter could explain.
- The title on the right emphasizes the key takeaway — the new safety policies are working!

Injuries by Month: January - September



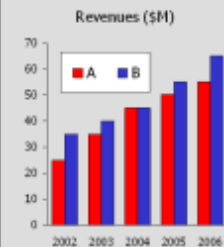
New policies reduce employee injuries



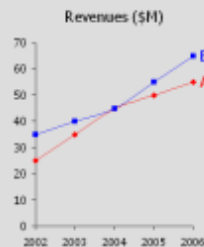
Slide Example #5

- The title on the left establishes two chart options, but leaves the audience wondering which is better. While the "Do" label suggests line charts are better, it's not clear why.
- The title on the right emphasizes the key takeaway — line charts do a better job *illustrating data trends* than bar charts.

Bar Charts vs. Line Charts

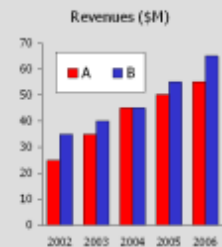


Don't

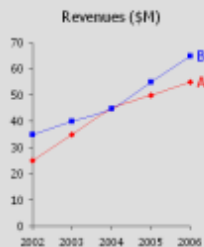


Do

Use line charts to illustrate trends



Don't

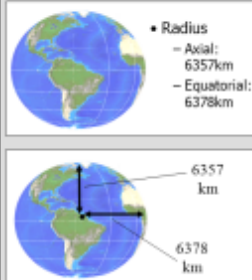


Do

Slide Example #6

- The title on the left gives the topic, but no meaning.
- The title on the right emphasizes the key takeaway — that diagram labels should be placed in close proximity to the objects they label.

Diagram Labels

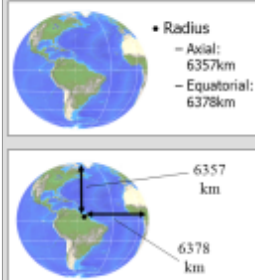


Don't



Do

Place labels close to objects



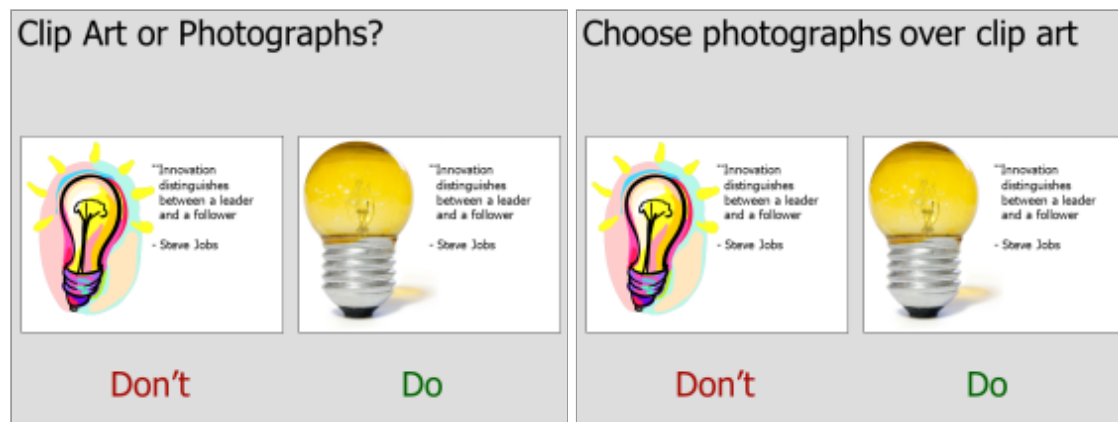
Don't



Do

Slide Example #7

- The title on the left is a form of rhetorical question. That's not a bad idea, although it would be more effective if the presenter asked the rhetorical question before displaying the slide on the right...
- The title on the right emphasizes the key takeaway — that photographs should be chosen over clip art. This assertion doesn't say why... that's part of my verbal delivery.



Summary of Slide Title Guidelines

If you follow these guidelines, your slides will provide effective support for your presentation.

1. Slide titles should convey your main point as an assertion.
2. Slide titles should be crisp, not wordy.
3. Slide titles should be larger than any other text on the slide.
4. Slide titles should be consistently located.
5. Slide titles should be easy to read.

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[Andrew Dlugan](#) is the editor and founder of [Six Minutes](#). He teaches courses, leads seminars, coaches speakers, and strives to avoid Suicide by PowerPoint. He is an award-winning public speaker and speech evaluator. Andrew is a father and husband who resides in British Columbia, Canada.

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