Resurrecting the Bullet Point: The Return of an Old and Valued Friend

by Philip Yaffe

Editor's Introduction

PowerPoint has come under attack in recent years. Well known figures such as Edward Tufte have castigated PowerPoint for corrupting minds and numbing thought. Some sociologists have condemned it for luring people away from listening to each other and communicating effectively. Scott Adams (author of Dilbert) often depicts PowerPoint as a facilitator of office dysfunction. From all this, you might think PowerPoint has badly wounded us and our society with its barrage of bullet points.

Phil Yaffe, a professional journalist and frequent Ubiquity *contributor, takes issue with the claim that bullet points are evil and are the cause of these problems. The real cause, he says, is that we have forgotten that as speakers we are really having conversations with our listeners. The bullet point can be one of the strongest tools in facilitating those conversations. Read on, and strengthen your own abilities at communication.*

Peter J. Denning
Editor

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The next time you are asked to do a presentation, don't. The word "presentation" implies a one-way communication: you talk, they listen. To be truly effective, what you really want is a conversation. True, you may be doing most of the talking, but unless your audience is mentally engaged with you, you are going to be considerably less effective than you might be.

Failure to understand this fundamental fact leads to some extremely bizarre and counterproductive presentation practices. In his famous attacks on PowerPoint, Edward Tufte says that bullet-presentations have corrupted minds, eviscerated our capacity for serious thought, and ended genuine communication (see Tufte's *Wired* article "PowerPoint Is Evil").

I have recently been reading and hearing comments that bullet points for slide presentations are dead—as if Tufte's exhortations are hitting home. Steve Jobs, co-founder and head of Apple Inc., has been giving legendary presentations without bullet points—and is cited as a paragon of "pointless" clarity. However, there are three things wrong with the notion that bullet points are dead:

1. Bullets points, an extremely useful communication tool, are moribund largely due to the unthinking, mind-deadening way they are too often used.
2. Steve Jobs does use bullet points, but in the way they were intended—with spectacular results.
3. There is no such thing as a slide presentation.

But first things first. Just what are these things called bullet points? And why are they causing so much polemic?

Bullet points are nothing but terse, telegraphic phrases that encapsulate an idea, usually without trying to explain it. By analogy, they are like chapter headings in a book. They give a glimpse of what the chapter is all about without trying to substitute for it. The chapter is still there to be read; the heading only whets your appetite to do so.

On presentation slides, bullet points do the same thing. They give the audience a glimpse of what the speaker is going to talk about in order to pique their interest. Often they also serve as a reminder of what the speaker has said in order to better fix the idea in their minds.

How could such an outstandingly useful tool be considered dead or deserving to be dead? Quite simply, because many presenters seem to have forgotten—or never knew — their true purpose.

How often have you seen so-called bullet points written out in long, convoluted sentences rather than in terse, pithy phrases? How often have you seen four to six bullet points, even well-written, splattered on the screen all at once like a plate of spaghetti thrown against a wall? If their purpose is to whet the audience's appetite, they should be introduced one at a time, i.e. bullet point 1, followed by the presenter's comments about the point; bullet point 2, followed by the presenter's comments about it, and so on.

This is only common sense, which in recent years seems to have become decidedly uncommon.

Thirty years ago, in the Dark Ages when people still used overhead transparencies, introducing bullet points one by one was standard practice. Although all the bullet points were written on a single transparency, the astute presenter would cover them with a sheet of paper, revealing them one at a time as needed.

It is quite easy to do the same thing with PowerPoint and other computer-generated slide programs, yet many presenters fail to do so. Putting the full list of bullet points on the screen in one fell swoop is like publishing a book with only a table of contents but failing to put headings on each individual chapter. It makes no sense.

But Steve Jobs doesn't introduce bullet points one by one, does he? Well, yes and no.

First of all, people who claim that Mr. Jobs doesn't use bullet points at all are off-target. He uses them all the time. However, there is no requirement that a bullet point look like a bullet point, i.e. begin with a bullet symbol (point, star, arrowhead, etc.) followed by text. Mr. Jobs frequently shows only a single phrase on the screen with nothing else there, or as a single phrase associated to a relevant image. When he does show a list, he introduces the points sequentially, commenting on each one before revealing the next one. The process is so smooth that people don't even realize that they are looking at bullet points. Whether they are recognized or not, the important thing is that they have the desired effect.

If all this sounds somewhat theoretical, let's make it more practical. **Example A** below is typical of slides seen in all too many presentations. It commits two cardinal sins. It uses full sentences rather than terse phrases, and it shows all the bullet points at the same time. **Example B** does the job well.

A

Style of Text

The style of the text should be telegraphic. This is in order to:

- **minimize how much text the audience must read on the screen;**
- **then re-focus the audience's attention on the speaker so that he can elaborate what is on the screen.**

B

Style of Text

Be telegraphic

- **Minimize text audience must read**
- **Re-focus audience attention on speaker for elaboration**

Because the text in **Example A** is painfully long, the astute speaker has no option but to remain silent while the audience is reading. Numerous surveys have shown that the speaker reading a long text aloud sends the audience's annoyance level right off the scale.

Because the text in **Example B** is admirably short, the speaker can read or paraphrase it along with the audience. For example, he could say: "You should use telegraphic style to minimize how much text the audience must read before re-focusing their attention on you, the speaker, for elaboration."

By emphasizing the key aspects of the text through tone, vocal variety, and perhaps even body language, the speaker is unlikely to provoke the same degree of annoyance as with the long text. On the contrary, the audience is likely to appreciate his effort rather than reprove it.

But a word of caution: the objective is to minimize the text, not to eviscerate it. **Example C** shows a really brief version of **Example B,** to the point of being abrupt. The argument is you want people to read the text along with the speaker to whet their appetite for what the speaker will say about it. This is a two-step process. First, focus audience attention on the screen; second, refocus it on the speaker.

C

Style of Text

Telegraphic

- **Minimize text**
- **Refocus to speaker**

However, we are only halfway there. For the best benefit, the text should be introduced sequentially, not all at once.

As previously noted, with transparencies this was achieved by moving a sheet of paper from top to bottom or using overlays. With 35 mm slides, this was achieved by using "build-up slides."

For example, instead of showing five bullet points on a single slide, the speaker prepared six slides. The first slide showed only the title; the rest of the screen was left blank. The next one showed the title plus bullet point 1; the rest of the screen was left blank. The next slide showed the title plus bullet points 1 and 2; the rest of the screen was left blank. The same was done for each succeeding slide. It was only on the last slide that the full text (general statement + bullet points) became visible.

Producing six slides was of course considerably more expensive than producing only one. But it was also considerably more effective. You should use the same technique with computer-generated slides. It is exceedingly easy and there is no additional cost. For example:

Build-up - 1

Build-ups work like this:

Build-up - 2

Build-ups work like this:

- **Show bullet 1**

Build-up - 3

Build-ups work like this:

- **Show bullet 1**
- **Show bullet 2**

Build-up - 4

Build-ups work like this:

- **Show bullet 1**
- **Show bullet 2**
- **Show bullet 3**

Introducing text sequentially rather than instantaneously makes reading or paraphrasing the slide to the audience even easier—and increases the effect.

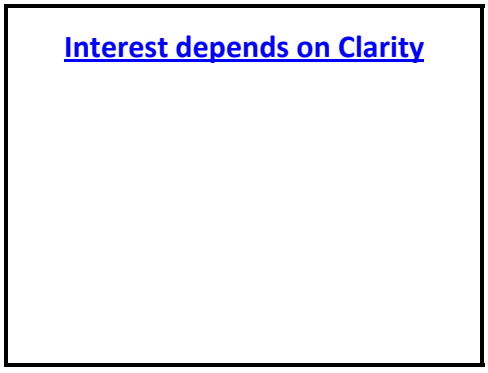
Remember: The words are on the screen not to replace, but to support the speaker. Speaking each line as it appears and giving it appropriate vocal and body language emphasis ensures that the words on the screen support the speaker's presentation in two crucial ways:

- First, the attention of the audience is totally focused on the bullet point (the chapter heading).
- Next, it is totally focused on the speaker for elaboration (the chapter).

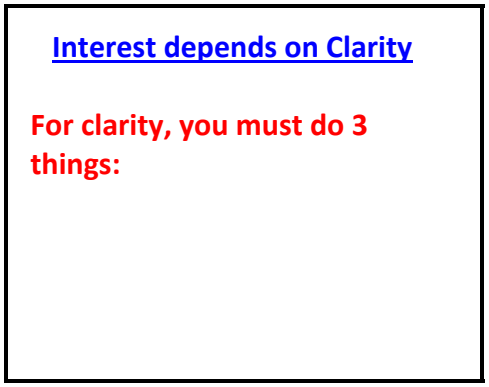
At no time is the audience's attention split between reading and listening.

Moreover, at no time is the speaker standing mute while the audience is reading, as if his presence didn't matter.

Let's look at a real example of this approach and technique. Here is a build-up slide I use in my writing and public speaking workshops, with the commentary I use as each bit of the slide appears on the screen.



"Virtually everyone agrees that interest depends on clarity. For a text to be interesting, it must be clear. In other words, people must understand what you are talking about. The problem is the word "clear" has no practical definition. What is clear to one person may not be clear to another. What we need is a functional definition, like a recipe, to be sure that our text is clear—that is, virtually everyone will understand it."



"To ensure clarity, you must do three things."

Interest depends on Clarity

For clarity, you must do 3 things:

1. Emphasize info of key importance

"Emphasize information of key importance. This means that before you start writing, you must first identify the key ideas you want your readers to take away with them. This is not always easy, but unless you do this first, there is no sense even sitting down at the keyboard."

Interest depends on Clarity

For clarity, you must do 3 things:

1. Emphasize info of key importance

2. De-emphasize info of secondary importance

"De-emphasize information of secondary importance. You don't want your key ideas getting lost in the details, so you have to make certain that details are clearly identified as such. There are various ways of doing this. We will look at them in a moment. But before we do, can anyone guess what the third thing is we need to do to be clear? (Allow a few moments for audience participation.)"

Interest depends on Clarity

For clarity, you must do 3 things:

1. Emphasize info of key importance

2. De-emphasize info of secondary importance

3. Eliminate info of no importance

"That's right. Eliminate information of no importance. Remember: Nothing in a text is neutral. Whatever doesn't add, subtracts. It doesn't matter how interesting or amusing a piece of information may be. If it isn't relevant, it doesn't belong."

If arguing that the speaker should read or paraphrase slide text aloud sounds heretical, it is probably because you have never seen it done properly. However, when it is done properly, it is an extremely valuable tool.

You don't have to take my word for it. Watch Steve Jobs. In his highly lauded presentations, virtually every time text appears on the screen, he reads aloud, using both his voice and body language to give it full meaning. And most of the time, the text appears on a blank screen without a visual. Why? Because an irrelevant visual is just that—irrelevant—and therefore distracting.

No wonder Mr. Jobs is such a popular presenter. He gives the audience precisely what they want—full information —precisely the way they want it—in carefully crafted, easily digestible nuggets. You can find an excellent example of Mr. Jobs in action delivering his keynote address at Apple WWDC 2010.

To summarize, to get the most from your slides:

1. Write text telegraphically.
2. Introduce ideas (bullet points) line by line, not all at once.
3. Use voice and body language to emphasize each line as it appears.
4. Comment fully on each line of text before moving on to the next one.
5. Avoid irrelevant, distracting visuals.

As Mr. Jobs and all other good presenters know, the term “slide presentation” is a pernicious misnomer. There is no such thing as a slide presentation. Slides only support the presentation; they should never be confused for the presentation itself.

The next time you think about doing a “slide presentation,” stop and think again. Never let what is going on behind you upstage you. Remember, your presentation should be a dialogue with your audience, not a one-way information dump. So if you ever feel that what you are showing is becoming more important than what you are saying, delete the slides, tear up your speech, and start over again.

This takes courage. But both you and your audience will be better off for it.

I would like to thank Carmine Gallo, author of The Presentation Secrets of Steve Jobs *and* The Innovation Secrets of Steve Jobs*, for his generous contribution to this article. Reach him at: www.carminegallo.com.*

About the Author

Philip Yaffe is a former writer with *The Wall Street Journal* and international marketing communication consultant. Now semi-retired, he teaches courses in persuasive communication in Brussels, Belgium. Because his clients use English as a second or third language, his approach to writing and public speaking is somewhat different from other communication coaches. He is the author of *The Gettysburg Approach to Writing & Speaking like a Professional* and *The Gettysburg Collection*. He can be reached at phil.yaffe@yahoo.com and phil.yaffe@gmail.com.

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