

Seminar 2: Slides to Remember

This session is more technical and focuses on the use of Powerpoint to create slides that usefully support your talk. Most of this can also be applied to any other software that you might prefer. The session talks about how to use text and images well and various ways that you can help your audience in following your talk. It also covers the use of technical aides and the presenter view and how to deal with things going wrong - technical or otherwise.

Slides are there to support your talk

1. Start by planning your story, then design the slides to help tell it
2. Your slides are for your audience: face your listeners, not your slides!
3. Keep slides clear and simple

Keeping your slides simple

1. Many lessons on slide design are from pre-digital times: now, slides are cheap!

- You can have as many as you want with very little information on each
- Put pieces of information that you want people to connect on the same slide
- You can build slides progressively using simple animations
- There's no need to follow a rule like '1 minute 1 slide'.
- If you feel you need to point at things, your slides are probably not clear enough!
- Empty space is fine, as long as the slide is balanced
- But sometimes the edges get lost by the projector, so don't put anything important at the edges of the slide

2. Be careful when reusing old slides – do they fit into the new story?

- In practise, you won't have time to design slides from scratch with each new talk
- But watch out: don't let the slides dictate the story!
- Remember the three questions from the last session: What is the aim of your talk, why are you the right person to give it and who is your audience?
- Is the story you told last time still appropriate?
- What can you improve, what needs to be different for this audience?
- Some old slides will fit right in, some will need changing, others won't fit this time
- Save each version of your talk, so you'll have more to draw on later

3. Only write what you want people to read

- While people read, they might miss what you say
 - Only write important things that you want people to remember or write down, keep writing as short as possible
 - If you need bullet points, you have got too much text: split the slide up
 - If you are talking in a language the audience is not very confident in, you can use a little more writing to help them catch what you say
- Be consistent with fonts
 - Only use one or two in your presentation
 - Non-serif fonts are easier to read (but opinions differ)
 - All-capital text is hard to read (and looks really angry)
 - Don't go smaller than font size 24 – around 32 good for normal text

4. You have three routes for information

- what you say, what you write and what you show
- The best way to make an important point is by using all three at the same time
- Show a picture/graphic, with a few words on the topic, while you explain it.

Slides and slide elements have different purposes

5. Your title slide introduces you

- Very little writing is actually needed
 - Only your title and your name are essential
 - You could include: your home institution, your lab
 - If it's on the slide you don't need to say it, you can start your story right away
 - But leave your title slide up for a few seconds in case people want to write down your title and your name
- Get a catchy title
 - At conferences, people decide which talks to go to based on their titles
 - Target a wide audience, the specialists are coming anyway
 - Avoid gene names or uncommon acronyms – a big turn-off for non-specialists
 - Make it short – ideally your title should fit in one line
 - Focus on what you are trying to achieve, rather than your method,
 - e.g. use “A viral diversity database to fight Maize Lethal Necrosis” rather than “Using Next Generation Sequencing to assess the diversity of MCMV and associated viruses in Mozambique”

6. Illustrating a story: images

- Images and graphics can make things more intuitive
- What point does an image help you to make? Don't just use them to fill empty space
- Never crush/distort images if they don't fit. Instead, crop them or rearrange
- A whole slide filled by an image is a good backdrop for an anecdote

7. Going into detail: diagrams

- Break down complicated plots
 - build your slide sequentially or put pieces on different slides
 - keep figure captions to a minimum, you are there to explain
- Colour costs nothing
 - Many published diagrams are in black and white to save printing costs
 - If you can re-generate the plot, use colours to distinguish data series
 - If you have taken the plot from someone else, consider re-writing the axis labels, numbering and legend or even redrawing it for the slides
- Remember some people are colour-blind/weak
 - Difficulty distinguishing red and green is most common and affects about 5% of men (and very few women). Avoid relying on red/green contrasts.
 - If you want to make sure your slides are readable for colour-blind people, there are online tools that simulate different kinds of colour-blindness
- Colours carry associations
 - Red/orange draw attention, green/blue are calming and positive
 - Keep the association between colours and what you use to represent with them consistent across all slides

8. Helping people keep track

- Remember the curve of detail: allow people to catch up
 - Your slides can make it clear what level of detail you are talking on
 - Diagrams and data indicate detail, simple slides (like a full slide picture or single line of text) show general information
 - Move between levels of detail to link scientific results back to the overall story
- An option: Interruption slides
 - You can deliberately interrupt your slides to indicate a partial summary or the start of a new thought
 - A single line of text on a slide shows “this is important”
- Or: A home slide
 - A slide that appears several times can help people to put your story together
 - It can include more text, as people will only read it bit by bit
 - Make it clear where you are in the progression by emphasising the bit that you're talking about now, by highlighting different parts or using animations.

- You can put the home slide at the start and end of each section of your talk
- Use meaningful titles for each section and your home slide also serves as a summary
- Titles should be useful statements
 - You can package important information into the titles of slides. E.g., instead of “Measuring expression of YFG in different tissues”, “YFG is expressed in flowers and pods”
 - Even if someone gets lost, they get the main point of the slide from the title
 - This is useful when writing papers or posters as well, as it allows your readers to get the main message from skim-reading
 - Keep titles short – always try to only use one line
 - Not all slides need a title

9. You have to have an acknowledgements slide

- The best way to thank people is to mention them during your talk itself
- Thanking those who were most important for what they actually did is nicer than thanking everyone vaguely
- but you can put up many more names than you say
- A group photo is a nice way of thanking a larger group
- Only thank funding bodies in words if you know they are listening, but always put up all their logos

Using technology

10. Backgrounds and designs

- Powerpoint has lots of standard designs: these are not all helpful
 - They often have complex designs which distract the audience
 - Or they have poorly chosen standard fonts or backgrounds
 - Only use the simplest ones
- Dark and light backgrounds
 - Contrast between the background and the text or images is important
 - Dark-on-light keeps people awake: good for diagrams
 - Light-on-dark makes text stand out better
 - Some photos (esp. micrographs) work better on light, some on dark background
 - Frequent switching of backgrounds can be disorienting
 - Coloured backgrounds are rarely needed
- Don't include additional elements on every slide
 - Your institution logo only needs to be in the acknowledgements, unless they insist put it everywhere
 - You don't need to keep putting date, venue, title, your name etc.
 - Slide numbers can help people refer back during the Q&A session. If you want to use them, make sure they are large enough to be read, you can take them off the slides where they are distracting
- Animations
 - “Appear” and “fade” are nice for adding or removing items step by step
 - Other animations can look a bit silly and distracting
 - If it's too complex, it's more likely to go wrong! Click through your slideshow, not just the editing mode to check everything
 - For slide transitions, only “fade” is subtle enough to be useful

11. Technical tricks can help

- Powerpoint's presenter view shows different output on the computer to the projector
 - If you need notes, use the notes section, not the text on the slide itself
 - Make sure that the notes are big enough for you to read and fit on the screen
 - It helps you keep an eye on the time
 - You can also see the next slide or animation step
- Using a wireless presenter
 - This is a small device for clicking through your slides

- It allows you to step away from the computer, but click through the slides yourself, rather than having someone else do it
 - Essential if you want to speak freely, use anchoring and always keep audience contact, but you need to be confident without notes
- Do you really need a laser pointer/pointing stick?
 - If you need to point to something on the slide, see if you can simplify it, e.g. by only displaying what you want to talk about, building your slide sequentially, using highlighting, zoom in, displaying an arrow etc.
 - This looks more prepared and everyone can see it
- Sound can be tricky: only use it if absolutely necessary
 - Laptop speakers aren't powerful enough to fill a big room
 - You'll need to check if the room has a sound system and how to connect to it
 - Try it out beforehand and check if the sound is clear at the back
- Videos can be nice, but they can interrupt the flow of your talk
 - Anything moving attracts attention away from you
 - Only talk about what is shown in the video while it is actually playing.
 - Only use videos with sound if you could not say the same things just as well
 - If you include a video, think of a way of getting the message across if the video doesn't work, so you are not stumped, don't spend a lot of time getting the video to play
- Try your technology
 - Things sometimes work on your laptop screen but not on the projector
 - Make sure the cables fit, especially if you use a Mac
 - Be prepared: have your talk on your computer, but also on a USB-stick, or send it to yourself by email/Dropbox

12. Sometimes things will go wrong

- What went wrong in talks you gave in the past? What are you worried might go wrong? Practise these things specifically
- Keep to time
 - Measure how long it takes in your practise sessions
 - Do you talk faster or slower when under stress? Take this into account
 - Define 2 or 3 checkpoints: where in your talk do you need to be at what time?
 - Use presenter view, a clock at the back of the room or on a table, or even your phone out on the table to keep an eye on the time during the talk
 - This way, you'll realise if you are behind early on, so you can speed up a bit, rather than cutting out a chunk at the end
 - If all else fails and you have to cut short, skip slides from your detailed work and go directly to your summary
 - Give the end of your story: how your work affects the issue
 - Offer to talk to anyone who is interested later on
- If you get interrupted
 - Zoom-in questions you can answer straight away, more complicated ones you can refer them to the Q&A
 - If they ask about something you discuss later in your talk, say you're coming to that. Don't change the order of your talk on the spot
- If technology fails, you can always fall back on your overarching story
 - It's better to give your talk without technology than to not be able to give the rest of the story
 - You can leave out some detail, just focus on the main results and what they mean for the problem you are working on
 - Audiences are more forgiving than yourself – everybody knows what it is like when your technology fails

To help you go deeper

- Susan McConnell (Stanford) does a nice job on much of what I have said, but with a focus on slide setup <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hp7Id3Yb9XQ>
- There are countless videos on Youtube and elsewhere on the internet
- People will tell you different things, so experiment and find what works best for you