

The Cognitive Style of PowerPoint: Pitching Out Corrupts Within

IN corporate and government bureaucracies, the standard method for making a presentation is to talk about a list of points organized onto stylized slides projected up on the wall. For years, before computerized presentations, those giving a talk used transparencies for projected images. Now presenters use a slideware program, Microsoft PowerPoint, which turns out billions and billions of presentation slides each year.

This chapter provides evidence that *compares PowerPoint with alternative methods for presenting information*: 10 case studies, an unbiased collection of 2,000 PP slides, and 32 control samples from non-PP presentations.

The evidence indicates that PowerPoint, compared to other common presentation tools, reduces the analytical quality of serious presentations of evidence. This is especially the case for the PowerPoint ready-made templates, which corrupt statistical reasoning, and often weaken verbal and spatial thinking. What is the problem with PowerPoint? And more importantly, how can we improve our presentations?

WHEN Louis Gerstner became president of IBM, he encountered a big company caught up in ritualistic slideware-style presentations:

One of the first meetings I asked for was briefing on the state of the [mainframe computer] business. I remember at least two things about that first meeting with Nick Donofrio, who was then running the System/390 business . . .

At that time, the standard format of any important IBM meeting was a presentation using overhead projectors and graphics that IBMers called “foils” [projected transparencies]. Nick was on his second foil when I stepped to the table and, as politely as I could in front of his team, switched off the projector. After a long moment of awkward silence, I simply said, “Let’s just talk about your business.”

I mention this episode because it had an unintended, but terribly powerful ripple effect. By that afternoon an email about my hitting the Off button on the overhead projector was crisscrossing the world. Talk about consternation! It was as if the President of the United States had banned the use of English at White House meetings.¹

¹ Louis V. Gerstner, Jr., *Who Says Elephants Can’t Dance? Inside IBM’s Historic Turn-around* (2002), 43.