

PowerPoint rules of the road – Rule 3: Fiber

*This article is part three of a three-part series on PowerPoint Rules of the Road. You can read rule **one** and **two** that covers recommendations and tips on slide deck format and flow.*

Fiber – *The Main Point*

Ironically, the content of the slides is the last component I generally look at. Only after all the appropriate steps have been taken to ensure an easily digestible message can I ready my mental digestive tract to process the fiber of the message itself. Yes, I know it's a bit superficial but think about it: if the author of the presentation has not taken the time to ensure a good **format** and **flow**, chances are the content is lacking as well. By spending time on the **format** and the **flow**, it actually forces the author to think logically about the content and will improve the final product. While the level of detail and nature of the content will change with every presentation, below are a few universal tips to help make your content better and avoid indigestion and audience reflux.

Check your jargon and industry-speak at the door.

We've all heard it, we all know it and it literally makes us wretch… *Achieving synergy by optimizing our product and service offerings is mutually advantageous to both customer and company* (translation: we do better when we work together). Winston Churchill once said "…short words are the best, and short words that are old are best of all." The goal of any communication is to be understood. If you are hoping for actions or decisions to come from your presentation, understanding the message is even more critical. If the message is not understood, how can anyone take action on it? Leave the industry-speak and jargon for another time. Know your audience and the level of understanding they bring to the table, and when in doubt, use short, old words.

Define the TLAs (Three Letter Acronyms).

NIMFTTAWYDUTA = Nothing Is More Frustrating To The Audience When You Don't Understand The Acronym! We use so many TLAs in our respective professions that it is wrong to assume people will know what we are talking about. From KPIs to SLAs, each TLA introduces the potential to confuse and obscure the meaning. So, if you must use them, define them first.

Graphics > Words.

At the risk of sounding cliche, I won't harp on this too much. It's common knowledge that a picture is worth 1,000 words. This is never more true than in a presentation. Where you can use pictures or graphics to illustrate a point, do so. A beautifully constructed graphic will stick in a viewer's mind much longer than a well-worded bullet.

Give your audience three things to remember and/or take-away.

Why three? It's magic…not too many…not too few. Three things is the perfect amount for your audience

to memorize without too much difficulty.

Leave your audience with a gift: a placemat or single-frame.

Placemats and single-frame slides that neatly sum up a longer, more complicated deck can be a powerful tool in your communication arsenal. But just because it is one slide does not mean it is easy to create; quite the contrary. It is far easier to create longer decks or liberally worded slides than to summarize a complex topic into one neat frame. When done effectively this tool may be the only communications vehicle you need. I have even seen pitches and proposals with only a single placemat to guide the conversation. Sometimes, I will even distribute the placemat in advance and structure the presentation flow to match so the audience can follow along without needing a full copy of the slides.

Get to the point up front; don't make the audience wait for "the big reveal".

There is a tendency to create slides like the prosecution builds an argument in a trial. They lay the groundwork fact-by-fact and wait for the big moment to reveal the punchline: the defendant is guilty. With presentations, time is of the essence so don't wait too long to state your main point. There is no need to dramatically stage a big reveal; state your point up front, clearly and concisely.

Don't shy away from delivering bad news but be sure to give the facts (and if possible provide solutions and/or options).

Bad news can be difficult to take and even more difficult to *give*. There is nothing worse than calling someone's baby ugly through the grace and majesty of PowerPoint. But it's even worse when the presenter dances around the issue; it becomes awkward for both the presenter and the audience. If you

have bad news to deliver, set context on the problem, build your fact pattern and state it clearly and concisely. Never walk into a presentation without proposed recommendations or at least options for moving forward. There's nothing worse than dropping the bomb of bad news and then leaving the room without an action plan or ideas on how to move forward.

Make it clear the problem we are trying to solve.

Stating the problem up front is foundational since, very often, the audience or readers have very different views on the problem, let alone, how to solve it. State the problem, and if possible, pause when you are presenting (better yet *before* the presentation) to validate that the problem is accurately defined. We have all seen too many presentations go sideways because the audience was hung up on whether we are all on the same page about the issue at hand.

Don't assume everyone has context or background on the issue or agrees on the facts.

Very often when you present a topic, you will be a subject-matter expert on that topic. You will likely know the issues inside and out. That can be a good thing so you know the material, but it can also mean that you assume everyone knows what you know, which is never the case. Provide your audience with the basic background and context so they receive a transfusion of the foundational understanding of the facts.

Find common ground up front. Give your audience something we can all agree to as you set the stage for the problem.

Some call it *motherhood and apple pie,* I call it *common ground*. Whatever you call it, they are

indisputable facts or background information that will garner agreement and “head-nods” before you dive into the controversial issues of the problem. Establishing common ground is the first step on the road to building consensus on a solution.

Use a framework (e.g. industry standard, leading practice, decision framework, etc.) to help analyze your issue.

There are many frameworks to solve a variety of business and technology problems. Frameworks do a number of important things for you. They help you solve the problem methodically, they establish a defensible approach and they prevent you from the perception (or reality) of making things up as you go. Leveraging a related framework to help you solve a problem is a very good business practice.

Turn data into meaningful information and conclusions.

Data is pointless unless we can draw meaningful conclusions, insights, or decisions from it. Long lists, tables or charts showing trend lines and scatter plots without any kind of explanation may as well be written in a foreign language. Do the thinking for your audience and tell them what they should take away from the chart or graphic. We all have data at our disposal but it takes a trained professional to create information and insight based on that data.

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hi, i'm justin

(nice to meet you)



I post weekly **professional insights** and **personal stories** from my life as a management consultant, a dad, and an eternal optimist.

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