



Slide science

Do you create a lot of presentations? Slide decks are a reality of business these days. Love it or hate it, slide decks are a nice way to present complex topics in a simple format, or so it would seem. Every year I spend many hours with my students discussing how to put together winning presentations. We've all seen it before: some presentations are too simple, some presentations are too complex, but finding that "just right" combination of graphics and insight is part art and part science...*slide science!*

There are countless examples of "bad" slide decks; just check out this [video](#) for a quick laugh. In this post, we will explore a few aspects of a slide deck that make complex topics easier to digest by your audience. The slides below highlight some common tips I review with my students every year.

A note of caution: don't ignore the first rule of presentations and slide decks: *know your audience*. This template and format may not be suitable for all situations or organizational cultures. I recommend you pick out parts from this deck that resonate with you and assemble them in a format that works for your audience. I have found this particular deck format is best used as an executive briefing of an issue with a multi-component solution recommendation.

So, let's explore the science behind the slides...

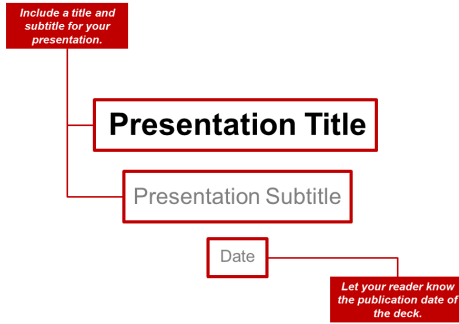
Slide 1: What is this all about?

I know it seems intuitive or obvious but a title page is important and serves many purposes. A title page helps you set foundational context about what you will be discussing with your audience. Our schedules on an average day may involve dozens of meetings covering a range of topics. Executives go in and out of meetings making decisions very quickly; a title slide lets them know what they are walking into.

Besides, I think of a deck without a title slide as a book without a cover. Jumping right into chapter one without knowing what book you are reading just seems awkward.

In cases where I am actually presenting the content to a live audience, I typically project the title slide so the attendees can chat casually before we get into the heavy content. It can help put your attendees and audience at ease if you can “schmooze” a little – appropriately of course – before the official start to the presentation. This also helps give a buffer to give your attendees time to settle in to their seats.

The title slide also gives an all important “expiration date” for the content in the deck. I have picked up old decks without a date only to find that they are years old. Today's date – or at least a month and year – helps set time constraints on the information being presented. For decks undergoing multiple revisions, you could consider inserting a version number on the title page and a version history in an appendix. Again, this depends on the deliverable you are building but it does work well when you are creating a deck in an iterative manner with multiple people.



Slide 2: What are we going to talk about and what should I know going in?

Communications experts tell you that you should:

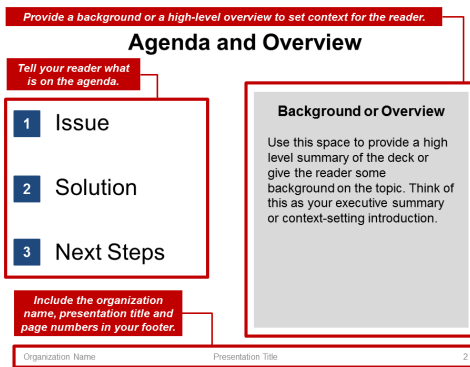
1. Tell your audience what you are going to tell them.
2. Tell your audience what you came to tell them.
3. Tell your audience what you just told them.

This slide meets the first requirement. An agenda gives us a map to follow for the presentation and gives us a preview as to where we are heading.

We also include a background or summary section next to the agenda. I use this section for a variety of purposes. You could use it to give the reader or audience basic background that they should know coming into this meeting. Or you could provide them with an executive summary of the main points of the deck. Or you could use it to describe the purpose of the meeting. The point is: use the real estate to get your audience in the right "head space" so they are prepared to receive the messages in the content slides.

The last highlighted feature of this slide is the footer that includes the organization (could be your company or your client's company), presentation title and page number. How many times have you heard

“what page are we on?” when conducting a web-based meeting? Page numbers are important so you can direct people to specific places in the document.



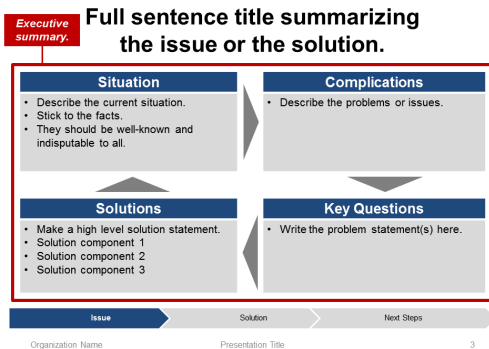
Slide 3: What's the problem and how can I solve it?

We've now made it past the introductions and context setting and are into the main content of the deck. First thing we need to do is get everyone on the same page about the specific issue we are here to discuss. It really doesn't matter how you do it but one technique I have used in the past is the Situation, Complication, Question and Solution method. There are many variations of this technique. Barbara Minto pioneered this communication method and advocated for a very structured way of building your messages.

However you decide to introduce the problem, make sure you are solution-focused rather than harping on the problems. Chances are you are presenting to an executive audience; last thing they want to hear is “we have more problems than we can handle and we have no idea how to fix it.” Lead with that message and it may very well be your last! Rather, tell your audience the problem(s) we are trying to solve and focus on your recommendations for addressing the problem(s).

One note here: sometimes you are dealing with highly technical issue and presenting to a technical audience. In this case, you may consider additional slides to further describe critical facts or further lay out the problem. Just remember, don't assume the audience knows what you know. You are not there to

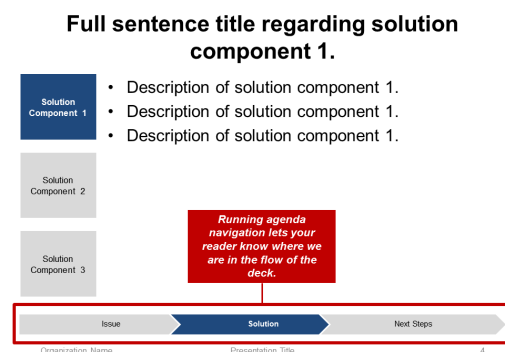
dazzle your audience with your brilliance, you are there to convey a message, collectively solve a problem and inspire action. Keep the messaging simple, and when in doubt, stick additional support in the appendix.



Slide 4: Are we there yet?

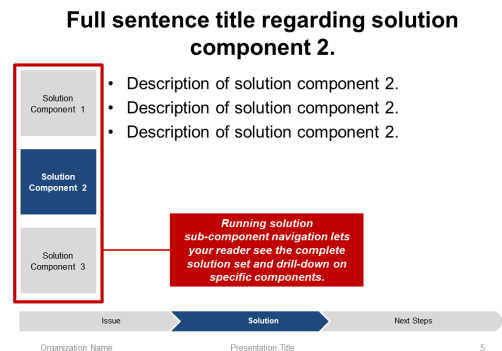
The next three slides dive into the solution. These slides focus on describing the components of your solution. They are all similar but I will highlight one key feature on each slide.

A running agenda navigation (introduced on slide 3) helps the audience orient themselves as to where they are in the presentation. This presentation is very straight-forward; it has three sections: issue, solution and next steps. Sometimes there are as many as 5-7 sections and a running agenda navigator helps us know where we are and where we are going.



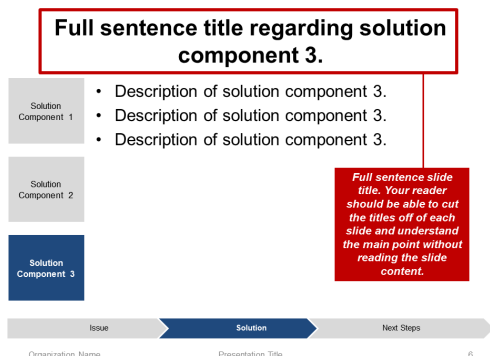
Slide 5: I'm lost...What's the solution again?

Similar to the running agenda navigation, there is a separate solution navigator. This is helpful when you have multiple parts to your recommendation or if the recommendation is broken into distinct phases. This navigational element again helps us orient ourselves to a specific solution component.



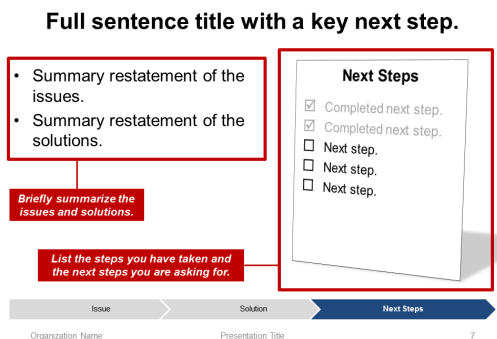
Slide 6: Off with its head!

You may have noticed that my titles are somewhat complete sentences versus a word or two. This is important as many executives only read the slide titles so we want to make them count. I usually advocate using a complete sentence or a bold statement that conveys the main point of the slide. One rule of thumb I use is: you should be able to chop off the slide titles and get the gist of the slide. You may not have all the details but you know what the slide was trying to convey.



Slide 7: Remind me what you need from me again...

The summary and next steps slide gives your audience a recap of what you just told them and presents the “ask” as to what you want your audience to do next. You can even include a couple of completed next steps so your audience sees that the ball is already in motion.

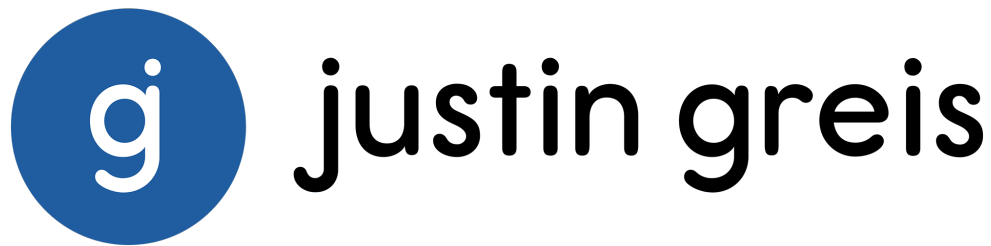


Well, that’s it folks! Lots of intuitive stuff here, but think about it: how many decks have you seen that is just one boring bullet after the next? Hopefully you can use some of these techniques to effectively communicate your message. Again, presentations are part art and part science, but there are proven techniques that you can apply to increase effectiveness of understanding the message.

I am curious about your success stories (or war stories). Feel free to respond to this post if any of these techniques work for you!

Download the template

[Click here](#) to download the presentation template in Microsoft PowerPoint (.pptx) format.



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