



PowerPoint rules of the road – Rule 2: Flow

This article is part two of a three-part series on PowerPoint Rules of the Road. You can read rule one [here](#) that covers recommendations and tips on slide deck format.

Flow – *The Storyline*

Imagine watching 2 minutes of a sitcom, 1 minute of a reality show, 3 minutes of the news and 5 minutes of a documentary. OK, some of you may do this but to the average presentation viewer, this kind of jumping around is very confusing as it lacks a common storyline. We have all seen slide decks that feel like they are a loose association of semi-related slides. Sometimes this is due to overuse of existing templates or previous decks but the root cause is a fundamental failure to step back and understand the story you are trying to tell with your presentation. It is easy to grab slides from old presentations and plop them into a deck but it takes a skilled storyteller to weave them into a well-crafted story. Each slide should advance the plot and add new information. They should provide some new insight or piece of information that strings each related fact together into a coherent flow. Like all good novels and epics, there are subtle seeds carefully planted by the author that ensures his/her story is told correctly.

Your title page is the book jacket of your deck.

A title page is the wrapper of your message. As much as you try not to judge a book by its cover, that kind of quick first impression is inevitable. The title page helps inform the reader what we are about to consume and also gives them time to get into the right frame of mind. Jumping right into the content without any pre-ambles can be a shock to the mental system. A title page gives time to adjust to the topic. Always include a date or time frame on your title page as well; last thing you want is someone picking up your deck three years later reading content that is totally outdated. A date on the cover provides context about the freshness of the content and an expiration date, of sorts, for future readers.

Use a table of contents and include a bit of background to get your audience into the right frame of mind.

Typically, the very next slide after your title slide is table of contents or agenda. After all, you want to tell your audience what they are about to endure... But if the table of contents takes up the left half of the page, is there anything you can do with the whitespace in the right-hand slide of the page? I typically include a brief bit of background on the topic or a paragraph on the document purpose. The goal is to set the right tone with your audience so any short preamble text you believe would increase mental absorbency is appropriate here.

Build a story. You should be able to walk through your slides and quickly recite the storyline.

Your slides should tell a story. In fact, one of the tips I cover later is putting together a storyboard or outline to construct your story. You should be able to give a 10-15 second overview of each slide, its purpose, what it conveys and why it is important as you walk through your deck. Each slide should advance the

storyline and plot. If it restates, reiterates or elaborates on a previously covered plot point, consider moving it as supporting details in the appendix.

Luke, use the footer. (-Yoda) Also, use page numbers and, if appropriate, include the title in the footer.

Footers are running reminders of what we are talking about. and help keep us focused on the topic at hand. Page numbers help provide a reference point when referring back to a place in the presentation, especially during Q&A. We have a rule of thumb in the audit world that you should be able to toss your work-papers up in the air and be able to reassemble them based on the page numbers, references and tick-marks. The same applies for slide decks. You should be able to toss a bunch of printed presentations in the air and have no trouble reassembling it based on the information in the footer.

Eat the elephant one bite at a time. Chunk the presentation into logical sections with dividers.

Section dividers help the reader logically break apart the topic into digestible chunks. Think of these as chapters of a book. Major sections like: *Executive Summary*, *Current State*, *Future State*, *Summary and Next Steps* and *Appendix* allow the reader to put themselves into the right head-space and focus on a specific topic. It also helps to build out your storyline when you use sections and chapters.

Further divide the topic into subsections, especially with a very complicated topic.

Complex topics often require further subdivisions. Sub-sections can be used just like the major chapters described above. I often do this if I am stepping through components of a process or

methodology/approach. Say, for example, there are 5 steps we took in the current state section and each step has a corresponding slide to describe its input, process and output. I may use sub-sections to describe each component.

Tell your audience what you are going to say, say it and then tell them what you told them.

This one is just good psychology and should be used as you structure your deck. The first slide or first few slides should provide an overview of what you are going to say, after which you get right to the point and state your main points in the fiber of your deck. Then, restate the main points reiterating what you just told them. This maximizes the primacy and recency effect; your audience will tend to remember the first and last thing you say and will often fade out in the gooey middle of message. So, give them a roadmap of what you are going to say, say it and then remind them of what was said.

Use a running navigation (where appropriate) to remind your reader where we are.

Anyone who has taken a road trip with kids are very familiar the question “are we there yet?” A running navigation helps orient your audience and reader to where we are in the flow of deck. It gives the audience/reader a sense of how much further we have to go until the end. The running navigation should match up with the sections you established in your table of contents. If you are using sub-sections to further break down the topic as described above, you can consider using a sub-navigational element as long as it provides orientation clarity and not confusion.

Put the supporting details in the appendix so you don't overwhelm your audience.

The shorter and more concise your presentation is, the better. You should have the bare minimum number of main content slides you can in order to convey your point. Supporting details, facts, figures, tables, lists and data should go into the appendix in some reference-able format so you can put footnotes in your main content that draw the reader/audience to the right exhibit in the appendix.

Don't forget the legalese (information classification, copyright, legal footers, etc.).

I wouldn't be a good IT risk professional if I didn't mention to include information classification, copyright and legal footer on your document. You should always assume that your presentation will grow legs and find its way to unintended audiences. You should do your part to at least warn unintended audiences that they should not be reading or viewing this material.

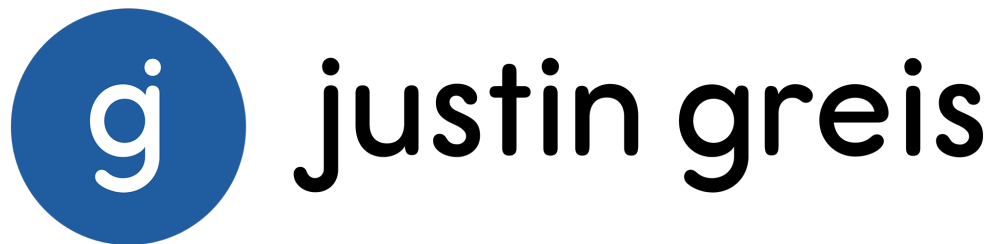
Put together a wireframe, storyboard, outline or straw-man to nail down the flow.

When we first started writing composition and essays in grade school, one of the first steps we were taught is to develop an outline so we have a guide to developing the content. PowerPoint slides are no exception. A wireframe, storyboard, outline or straw-man are all great ways to lay your main points out before you dive into developing the fiber of your deck. Think of it as your map: if you are driving somewhere you have never visited before, you would plug your destination into your mapping app of choice and have a guide for getting to where you are going. An outline is a map of your main points and ensures you arrive at the desired audience/reader conclusions.

Full (or near-full) sentence titles helps to get to the point, if your audience is accustomed to it.

Another thumb rule we promote is the use of full (or near full) sentences in the titles of slides. The goal is to boldly state the conclusion or take away of the slide. Many people believe you should be able to cut off the titles from a slide deck and understand the main point of the presentation. I generally adhere to this rule but have had to adapt this style based on the culture of the organizations with whom I work. Some companies are more used topical titles such as: *Background, Stakeholders, Approach, etc.* – one word descriptors describing what the slide is versus what it says. An alternate approach I have found helpful in instances such as these is using a call-out box or sub-header on the slide written in full or near full sentences. That way, we still have the one word descriptor as the title while preserving the key conclusion spelled out for the reader.

Stay tuned for part three of ***PowerPoint Rules of the Road – Rule 3: Fiber***. In case you missed it, check out [rule 1](#) that covers recommendations and tips on slide deck format.



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(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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