9 Using PowerPoint Effectively

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Reading this chapter will help you to:

- avoid the most common mistakes when using PowerPoint, especially avoiding getting too technical
- keep your slides simple
- think about PowerPoint as a component within the overall presentation
- incorporate freely available images into your PowerPoint slides
- know where to look for ideas and inspiration

PowerPoint is presentation software that comes with Microsoft Office. If you have a PC or laptop at home, it will probably be loaded with PowerPoint. The software should also be available on the network in many colleges and universities, because it is the world's leading presentation software. PowerPoint is everywhere! According to Microsoft, PowerPoint is installed on approximately half a billion computers across the world. Think how many individual presentations that might mean per day; think how many individual slides might be generated!

In this chapter, when we refer to PowerPoint, we mean any kind of computer-based presentation software such as PowerPoint, Apple Keynote, open source software such as Impress or web-based presentation packages.

In this chapter we want to give you guidelines on the effective use of PowerPoint. The end of the chapter has some suggestions for what to do when you are having difficulty with a particular PowerPoint problem. We are assuming some basic knowledge of presentation software.

This is a book covering various aspects of student presentation skills and not a book devoted specifically to PowerPoint. Other books talk you through all the standard 'how to' aspects of PowerPoint. They explore all the technical aspects, for instance how PowerPoint can be enhanced through the use of free add-on products such as Microsoft Producer. This chapter is very non-technical.

Background

PowerPoint started out as a graphics program designed by researchers who wanted to find a quick way of presenting information when bidding for research funding. PowerPoint was designed in 1987, and the company which produced it was rapidly bought up by Microsoft. By 2007, PowerPoint totally dominated the world presentation software market, both in commerce and in education.

Most students who are accustomed to using this software will not realize the extent to which it has changed presentations. Only a few years ago visual aids usually consisted of 35mm slides, and hand-drawn acetate sheets projected onto a screen. But now in further and higher education (certainly in the United Kingdom and in the United States), PowerPoint is widely used by teachers as the standard way of presenting. It is also used by students as the principal form of undertaking a class presentation and as a learning tool.

So what's the problem? Most students find PowerPoint fairly easy to use at a simple level. However, its ease-of-use can also be a major problem. It is very easy to make a substandard PowerPoint presentation. Inexperienced users tend to:

- use as many of the features as possible such as lots of exotic fonts

or

- get bogged down in technical complications, because PowerPoint can do lots of very clever things, for example moving text and animations

PowerPoint is capable of producing presentations of great sophistication, with a combination of text images and sound. Therefore it is highly technical. As an example of how complex it can be to understand, the textbook *PowerPoint for Dummies* (Lowe, 2003) is over 300 pages long! Our aim is to help you to use PowerPoint in a simple and easy but effective fashion.

What's wrong with PowerPoint?

The main problem is the way that it is misused. The main charges levelled against PowerPoint by its critics such as the famous academic and designer Edward Tufte (2003: 23) are that it:

- makes presenters lazy and inclined to think in bullet points
- is not good at presenting data because there is not enough space on the slide
- encourages too much reliance on technological gimics such as slide transitions

His criticisms have been taken up across the world by designers and presenters and have led to something of a backlash against PowerPoint. We need to repeat at this point that PowerPoint is an excellent presentation tool, but is easy to misuse.

What is good about PowerPoint?

- It can explain something in visual terms that would take many words to explain.
- It is a comprehensive presentation package. Everything is together in one place: templates, the ability to add sound, colour, to insert graphs and charts, to use images, to link directly with the world wide web. It can also be enhanced by add-ons such as Microsoft Producer, in order to produce dynamic presentations incorporating audio, video, images and web pages. The technology can be used to create potentially astonishing presentations.
- PowerPoint is a wonderful organizer. You can put all your slides in sequence and number them, but you can also edit them and change the order at a press of a button. No-one need ever spill all their slides or acetates on the floor again!
- You can add your own notes to give a personalized commentary on individual slides. You see your notes but no one else does.
- You can run the software as a short automatic presentation while you sit back.

In addition, it can make your presentation much more:

- memorable: through a combination of words, pictures and sounds
- powerful and strong: by using images which impact on the audience
- thought-provoking: by using appropriate quotations and puzzles
- colourful: by making the slides vibrant with background and colourful text
- creative: by designing your own diagrams or by importing photographs, charts, etc (but beware of copyright – see Appendix 2).
- dynamic, current: you can quickly update slides and add new material at the last moment
- fun to create and hopefully to view as well
- portable: provided you know that there is projection equipment available, you can take your presentation around with you on a flash drive. At worst, you can carry a backup copy of PowerPoint transparencies.

Despite all this, PowerPoint presentations are not nearly as effective as they ought to be. Students often put in the effort, but the results are often poor. Why is this?

Mistakes that PowerPoint users commonly make

Content

Too much reliance on PowerPoint A common mistake with the inexperienced presenter is to rely on PowerPoint too much and to structure the whole presentation around the presentation software. PowerPoint then ceases to be an aid and becomes the total focus. Instead of being a tool, it becomes The Presentation. This often happens

when PowerPoint is used as a series of lecture notes which the students simply read out.

Relying on wizards The Auto Content Wizard can easily lead you down the wrong path, so that you end up with a completely different presentation from the one you intended. You can easily find yourself locked into a style or a way of thinking that does not work for your subject area. For instance, the following slide, based on a template, is attractive, but not a particularly relaxed and gentle way to start thinking about brainstorming. The revised version is easier on the eye. (See Figure 9.1.)

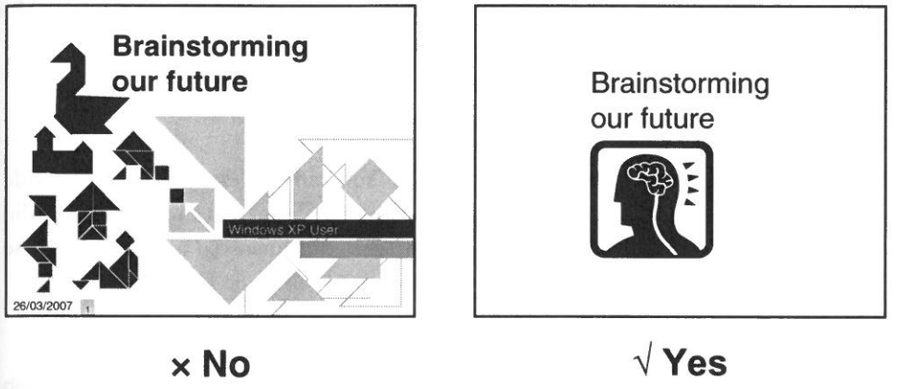


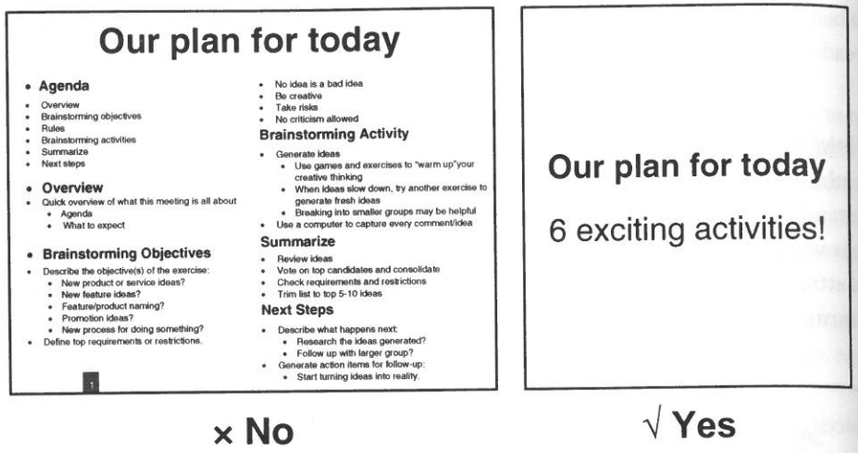
Figure 9.1 Make the slides appropriate

Edit out the detail. Figure 9.2 (page 122) has far too much detail and the audience will find it impossible to read. The alternative on the right is simple and less complicated.

Information overload Simplify, rather than overload the audience with information. A couple of key points are better than lots of bullet points, as Figure 9.3 (page 122) indicates.

Thinking in bullet points It is very easy to oversimplify in PowerPoint. Complex ideas in many subjects do not lend themselves to being 'sliced and diced', i.e. neatly packaged into bullet points, as Figure 9.4 (page 123) suggests.

Getting too technical and wasting time 1 Being able to introduce ideas with smooth transitions and sound effects can feel like a tremendous personal achievement. But in doing the technical work, you can easily lose focus and forget key points.

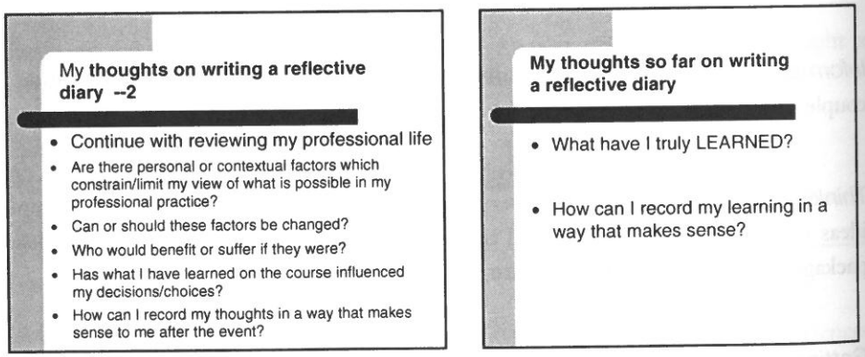


× No √ Yes

Figure 9.2 Avoid insignificant detail

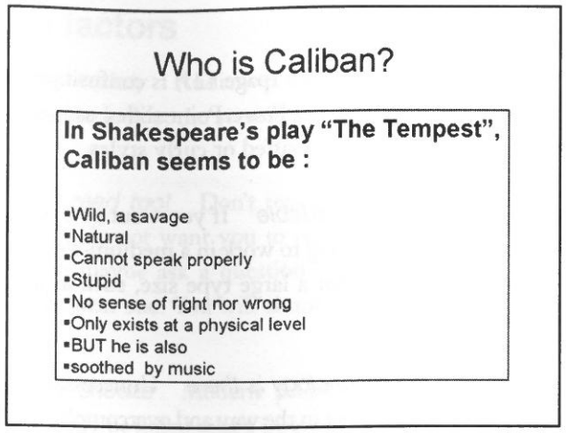
Getting too technical and wasting time 2 You can use PowerPoint to provide moving images and film clips. You can also use PowerPoint to add a background audio track. However, do consider whether it is worth the effort involved to synchronize the images or audio with your message. If you want to use an audio background:

- think very hard about what will be an appropriate background
- consider using a CD or MP3 player rather than playing the sound file through PowerPoint
- keep asking yourself, if you were a member of the audience, would you enjoy the background sound or might you feel alienated and put off by it?



× No √ Yes

Figure 9.3 Key points



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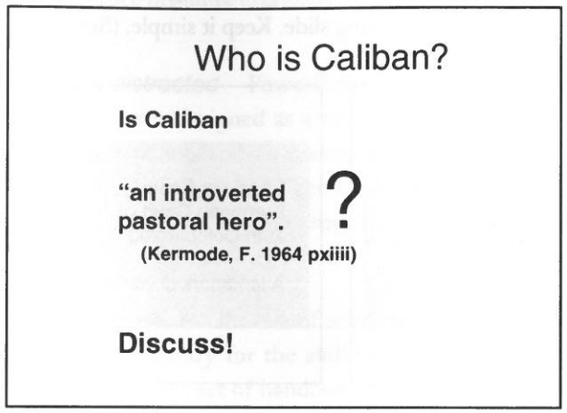
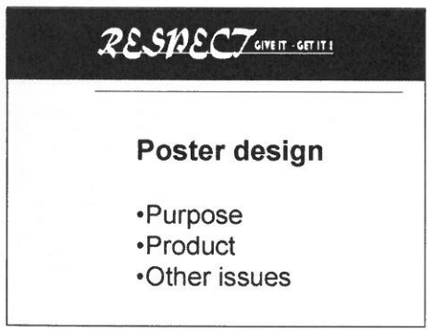


√ Yes

Figure 9.4 Avoid too many bullet points



× No √ Yes

Figure 9.5 Avoid too many styles

How it looks

Too many type styles The slide in Figure 9.5 (page 123) is confusing because of the range of styles. Stick to plain simple styles. For PowerPoint slides, sans serif styles, i.e. with no tails or curly lines, are preferable to seriffed or curly styles.

Too small type size, making the text unreadable If you want everyone at the back to see it, 16 point type size is simply not going to work in a medium-size or large room, as you can see from the slide below. Go for a large type size, such as a minimum of 32 point. (See Figure 9.6 below.)

Over complication just because the technology is there Unnecessary backgrounds, 'water marks', washes and distractions can get in the way and overcomplicate the message. The worst complicating factor is choosing a totally inappropriate and over-complicated type style, as you can see from the following slide. Keep it simple. (See Figure 9.7 below.)

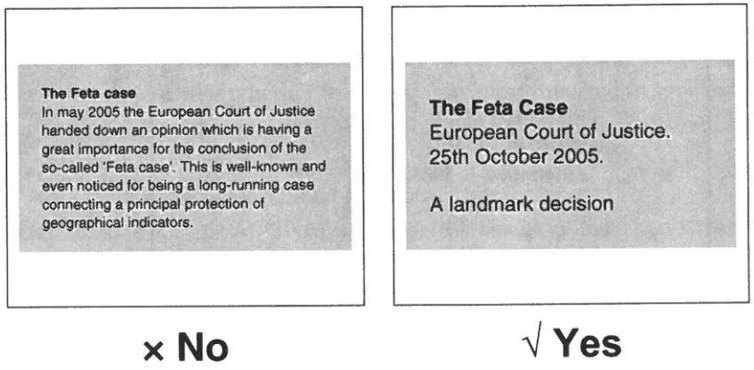


Figure 9.6 Make sure the type is the right size

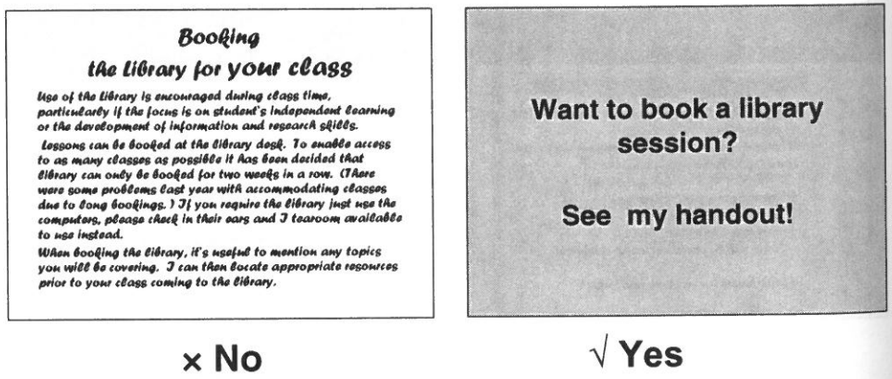


Figure 9.7 Keep it simple

Audience factors

Audiences want variety Audiences want to see the face, gestures and a human being! They don't want to look at the screen throughout the session.

Audiences can read too! Don't read out every point on every slide. Please! Most audiences simply do not want you to read it all out. Allow them to read the slide in silence and then maybe ask a question. Do not read out the whole slide and move straight onto the next one. You will simply alienate and bore your audience.

Audiences can snooze Modern projection equipment is sometimes quite noisy. Audiences can easily be lulled asleep by a whirring noise in the background, a warm room and an endless sequence of slides, especially in the session immediately after lunch.

Audiences can get distracted PowerPoint was designed for presenting images and simple ideas. It was never designed as a medium for presenting handouts. Audiences may want to look at handouts and a screen at the same time, but the handouts can be a major distraction. The audience may get eyestrain if their eyes have to rapidly flick between long and short distances. They may be tempted to ignore your screen presentations, and idly leaf through their handouts.

If you want your audience to take lots of notes, issue a handout as you start your presentation. If it is not necessary for the audience to take lots of notes, consider telling them that you will provide a set of handouts at the end. The audience can always take notes, and write them up on your PowerPoint handout afterwards.

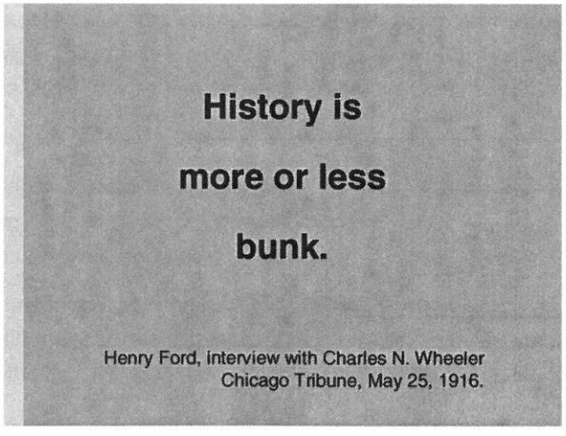


Figure 9.8 Make your audience think

Introduction	Short automatic PPT presentation	Discussion based on PPT	Verbal Summary	*My key point!!*	Timing
Flip Chart Quiz!	Communication skills Issues?	Communication skills - new skills for today!	Main points = 1. Xxxx 2. Xxxx 3. Xxxx	Handout of PPT image	15 minutes exactly!
Time, in minutes					**Total**
2	3	7	2	1	**15**

Figure 9.9 A draft storyboard

Tips for getting the best out of PowerPoint

1 Think about your audience. What exactly are you trying to achieve? When are you going to use your visual images? How do you want your audience to use the support? Think of PowerPoint as a very useful support. But not as the only resource at your disposal.

Consider what you want the audience to be doing as they see the slides, and afterwards. Thinking? Taking notes? Being entertained?

2 A simple structure for the whole presentation. Do you need PowerPoint for the whole presentation? Think about using PowerPoint as the beginning and ending of your show. Do not structure the whole presentation around PowerPoint. If you start thinking in bullet points, you are probably in trouble!

3 Think in terms of ideas, not bullet points. If you are clear about the ideas that you are trying to communicate, you may find that you can neatly summarize them in bullet points. Or you may find that you need to expand your ideas. You might be better with one PowerPoint slide which you talk about, than half a dozen slides full of bullet points. Figure 9.8 (page 125) provides an idea of how you could effectively and simply open a presentation.

4 Tell a story. If you think of your whole presentation as a narrative, a story, PowerPoint can be a vital part of that story. There is some excellent material on the Web to help you to learn to structure your PowerPoint slides.

By all means, tell a story with a few PowerPoint slides, but remember that PowerPoint software is not the story. It is part of the medium. It is not the message itself. Use it as part of a bigger story in the presentation. For instance you could run a short, three-minute, automatically timed PowerPoint show within your overall presentation, as a short sequence within a longer talk.

5 Use a storyboard. There is some very useful material on the Microsoft site about planning your PowerPoint slides with a storyboard. You could use a storyboard to plan the whole presentation, including the section with PowerPoint. (See Figure 9.9, page 126.)

6 Use images to support the central message. One of the hardest aspects of presenting is to use visual images that reinforce your message rather than detract from it.

The three steps are:

1 finding images to support the text
2 being clear what you want those images to say
3 then using images to help tell the story

Is your image going to complement the text? In other words will it support the text and work with the text. Or will it supplement the text? In other words, will it add something new to the text and elaborate in some way, like the image in Figure 9.10 (page 128)?

7 Keep it simple. The basic layouts and designs in PowerPoint will work if you keep them simple. After all, they have been designed by presentation professionals.

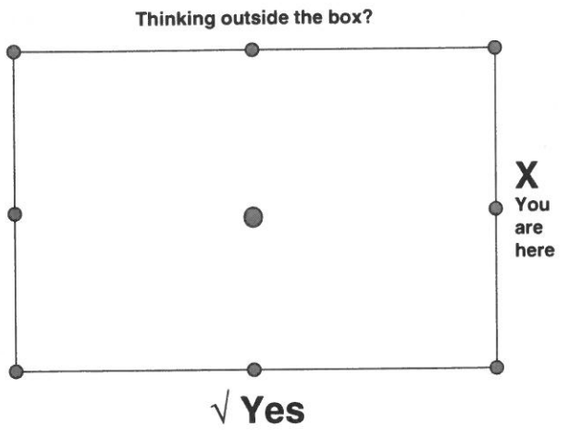


Figure 9.10 An image can supplement the text

So set yourself simple guidelines such as in Table 9.1. See Table 9.1 (page 129).

Some examples of simple but effective slides, using a template design by a student, are shown on page 130.

Diagrams

You can create diagrams yourself by using simple drawing tools within PowerPoint. It is quick and straightforward to create boxes, lines, arrows. An example of this is Figure 9.14 (page 132). Or consider drawing something by hand and scanning it into your computer. What you lose in polished performance, you may gain in spontaneity and creativity. Your tutors will appreciate something that looks a bit different. Sometimes, an object that looks a little less polished can be highly effective, as Figure 9.15 (page 133) illustrates.

Ensure that everyone can see the images that you are using in PowerPoint.

1 Check that your type size is sufficiently large. Probably you will need at least 32 point.
2 Press F5 to show the whole screen.
3 Ensure that you drag pictures right to the corner of the screen so they are as big as possible.
4 You can also use the zoom feature in PowerPoint to focus on a particular issue. For instance, use zoom to highlight one part of an equation, or a detail on a drawing.

Presenting numbers

Only state the most basic headline numbers in PowerPoint slides. If you want to display graphs or charts that you have created, use handouts to get more space. (See Appendix 1.)

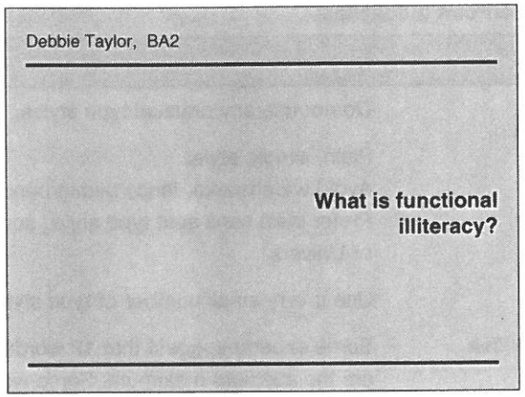
Table 9.1 Simple PowerPoint guidelines

Guidelines	Comment
Keep it readable	Do not use any unusual type styles.
Keep it plain	Plain, simple style. Avoid watermarks, fancy backgrounds. Prefer plain sans serif type styles such as Arial or Univers.
Keep a consistent style	Use a very small number of type styles.
Minimize words on the slides	Some experts suggest that 12 words per slide are the absolute maximum. Some would say just six words!
Minimize bullet points	Too many bullet points can get messy, untidy, very tedious and difficult to read.
Use colour sparingly and carefully	Remember that some of your audience may be colour blind.
Avoid movement	Movement can cause distraction and can look unintentionally funny.
Avoid anything that is complicated	Unless you are being assessed on your technical skills, avoid technical complications.

Images for PowerPoint

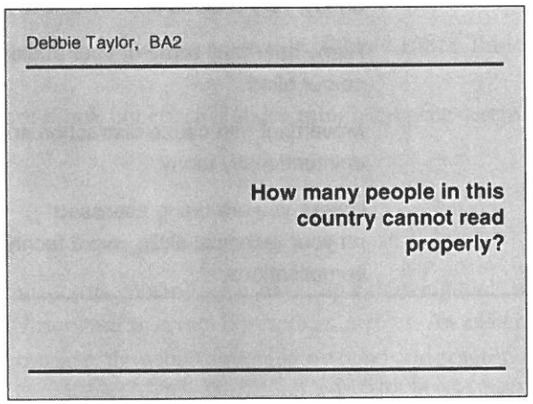
Let us assume that you may want to put some images in your PowerPoint presentation. You know that there is clipart available on PowerPoint, but you are not inspired by it, and you'd like to find something different. You probably don't want to pay a fee to the provider of the image, so you will want to use a free image. You will also want to do it legally, and of course you will not want to infringe copyright law.

Copyright issues Clipart that comes with the software will be no problem. However, most images on the web and most images available through data banks are restricted in some way. Any kind of re-use, including in a student project, could potentially break copyright law. In general terms, students can copy material under the fair dealing exception for 'research or private study'. Make sure you are clear about the terms of the copyright holder. Consequently any collection which has already been cleared for copyright, such as a university or college collection of digital images, is going to be very



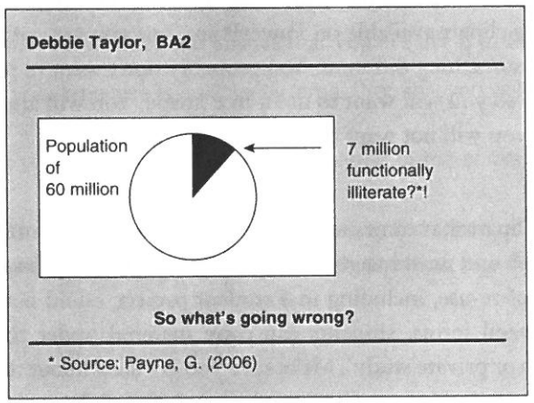
√ Yes

Figure 9.11 Home-made template design slide one



√ Yes

Figure 9.12 Home-made template design slide two



√ Yes

Figure 9.13 Home-made template design slide three

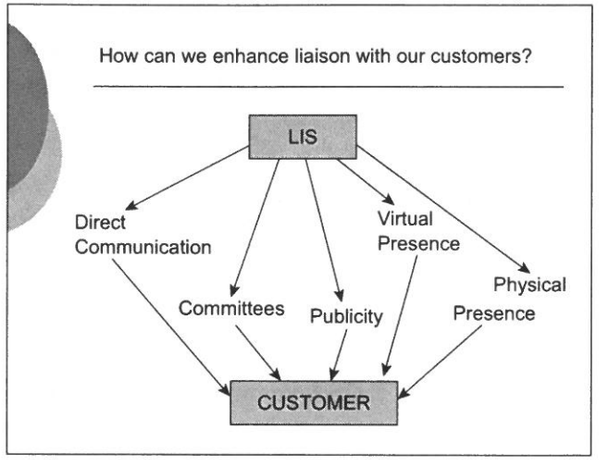
helpful when you are using PowerPoint. Of course, if you make your own images, they are your own intellectual property and you do not need to be concerned about copyright. For anyone concerned about copyright issues, which should be all students, the organization TASI is very helpful in this area – see below.

So where do you go to obtain free images? Here are some suggestions. What is available to you depends on your country, and quite possibly your college and its resources. The following suggestions are primarily for UK students but are relevant to all students.

- Microsoft Office online. Clipart. http://office.microsoft.com/clipart/default.aspx?lc=en-gb
  (You have to be careful how you use this and you must abide by all their guidelines. However there are lots of images here that go way beyond the clipart available in your standard Microsoft Office package.)
- AHDS visual arts. http://vads.ahds.ac.uk/
  (National service sponsored by UK Jisc. Look for the search images button.)
- SCRAN database. http://www.scran.ac.uk/
  (This is included as an example of the sort of subscription database that your own library might have. It can only be used for educational purposes but is very useful.)
- TASI (Technical Advisory Service for Images). http://www.tasi.ac.uk
  (National service sponsored by UK Jisc. A storehouse of material, at a technical and scholarly level. Useful for guidelines on the legal position. In particular, check out the following for finding images online – http://www.tasi.ac.uk/advice/using/finding.html; finding stock images – http://www.tasi.ac.uk/advice/using/finding_stock.html; and a review of image search engines – http://www.tasi.ac.uk/resources/searchengines.html.)

Image searching tools Many general search engines have an image searching facility, for instance Google or Yahoo images. You can use the advanced search feature to pick up more specific images, for instance, to pick up images specifically from the UK universities search on domain ac.uk. TASI has many more examples of search tools. Do consult this service, because image searching tools are constantly changing and developing.

There are several collections which can be safely considered for educational use. The most well-known of these is Flickr (http://www.flickr.com/). This contains collections of photographs made available for individuals. Some of these are only available to individuals in a closed group, some are available to everyone. Each individual photograph has a copyright and licensing statement making it clear how it can be used. Searching is not particularly straightforward but you can try using the search tools to find freely available materials.



√ Yes

Figure 9.14 Design your own charts

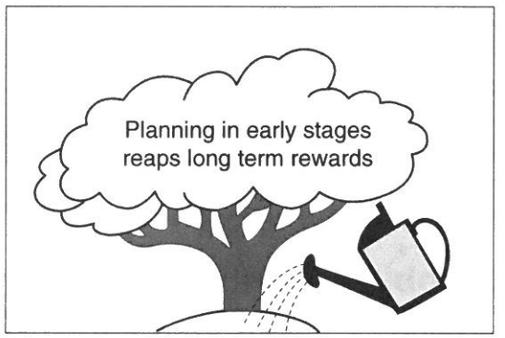
The alternative is Morguefile (http://www.morguefile.com/); a morgue file is a newspaper term for an archive of news material, photographs and so on. Morguefile is an international file of high-resolution digital photographs for public use.

The third major database to consider is Wikimedia Commons (http://commons.wikimedia.org/). This is a massive database, part of the Wikipedia project. It contains many images and other kinds of content such as puzzles, diagrams and videos clips. All of these are freely available. You are allowed to copy, display and modify the files but you have to acknowledge the source and the authors. You also have to agree to release any copies or improvements that you make, so that other people may use or add to your work. You are encouraged to contribute your own work – to give as well as to take.

The advantages of this fantastic collection include the fact that a number of major collections are part of the project and are therefore now in the public domain. It is also relatively easy to search. Each file has a brief history, and in some cases, links to other material. More details can be found at: http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Commons:Welcome

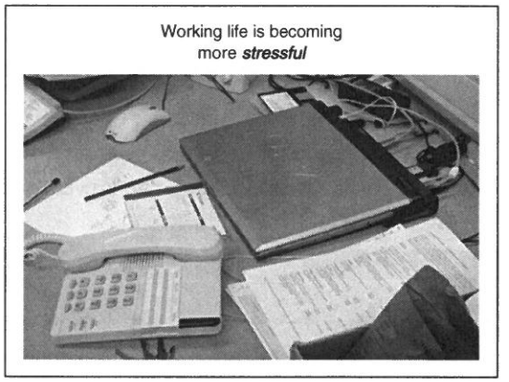
Scientific images Many American federal agencies have scientific images available without copyright restrictions. The best place to investigate these is through TASI: http://www.tasi.ac.uk/advice/using/finding_science.html. This leads to both American sites and extensive resources through the UK Intute academic service.

Digital camera Last, and certainly not least, if you can get access to a digital camera, then a totally new world of PowerPoint images opens up to you. If you take your own



√ Yes

Figure 9.15 Hand-design your own images



√ Yes

Figure 9.16 Use your own photographs

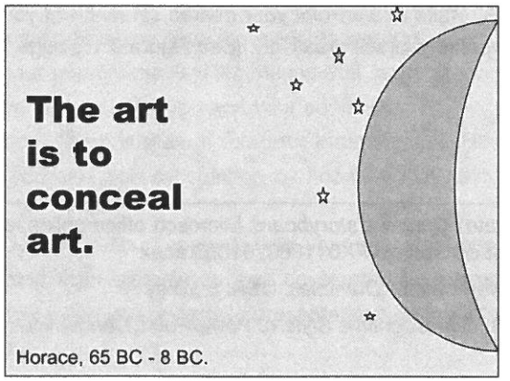


Figure 9.17 Be creative, be relevant

photographs, you will have legal control of the image and you can use your creativity to put across the message that you want. (See Figure 9.16, page 133.)

If you take photographs of people, you must always ask them if they mind you using their image. If the child is a minor, you must always seek parental permission. If you are taking photographs in a public building, seek permission before photographing.

If you have problems with PowerPoint

There are many books which give you advice on using PowerPoint. There is of course a lot of information available within PowerPoint itself, either by using the Office Assistant or by using Microsoft Office Assistance if you are connected to the web. The Microsoft website has many useful tips and guidelines such as the tips on using a storyboard to plan your presentation.

Beyond this, many universities and colleges will have their own guides to using PowerPoint. There may be one in your own institution. Failing that, go to your favourite search engine and use the advanced search function to enter PowerPoint tutorial and domain ac.uk which will get you a list of UK academic PowerPoint tutorials.

KEY PRINCIPLES FOR EFFECTIVE USE OF POWERPOINT

1. Keep reminding yourself that PowerPoint is a support for your presentation, not the presentation itself.
2. Keep thinking from a user perspective, and provide clarity and simplicity plus sufficient information.
3. Use PowerPoint for what it does best – linking text and images.
4. You are not alone; there is a great deal of free support on the web.
5. Stay in charge. Make PowerPoint your trusted servant, not your boss!
6. Enjoy, and express yourself creatively. (See Figure 9.17, page 133.)

Resources

Atkinson, Cliff (no date) *Create a storyboard.* Microsoft office online, available from: http://office.microsoft.com/en-gb/FX011886751033.aspx

Lowe, D (2003) *PowerPoint for Dummies.* USA: J. Wiley.

Tufte, Edward (2003) *The Cognitive Style of PowerPoint.* Connecticut: Graphics Press LLC.

TASI (Technical Advisory Service for Images) (2007) http://www.tasi.ac.uk