

PowerPoint: shot with its own bullets

Imagine a world with almost no pronouns or punctuation. A world where any complex thought must be broken into seven- word chunks, with colorful blobs between them. It sounds like the futuristic dystopia of Kurt Vonnegut's short story [Harrison Bergeron](#), in which intelligent citizens receive ear-splitting broadcasts over headsets so that they cannot gain an unfair advantage over their less intelligent peers. But this world is no fiction--it is the present-day reality of a PowerPoint presentation, a reality that is repeated an estimated 30 million times a day.[\[5\]](#)

Stanford University's [Cliff Nass](#) was quoted in the New Yorker [\[1\]](#) saying that PowerPoint "lifts the floor"; it allows some main points to come across even if the speaker mumbles, forgets, or is otherwise grossly incompetent. But PowerPoint also "lowers the ceiling"; it makes it harder to have an open exchange between presenter and audience, to convey ideas that do not neatly fit into outline format, or to have a truly inspiring presentation. This is what I was getting at when I created the [Gettysburg PowerPoint presentation](#) (figure),[\[2\]](#) a parody that has been viewed by hundreds of thousands of frustrated PowerPoint sufferers. I used PowerPoint's AutoContent Wizard (which Parker [\[1\]](#) calls "a rare example of a product named in outright mockery of its target customers"), adding only the slide "Not on Agenda!" to the standard format.

Nobody should be surprised that PowerPoint does not measure up to the great speeches of history, such as Lincoln's Gettysburg address. And it is certainly a shame when a potentially interesting presentation is dumbed down by another formulaic over-application of PowerPoint. But when PowerPoint leads not just to boredom but to bad decisions, it is a tragedy, not just a shame.

For an example of excellent decision-making without PowerPoint, consider the agenda of Apollo programme-manager [George Low](#), on Aug 9, 1968.[\[3\]](#) At 0845, Low met with Houston center-director Robert Gilruth to recommend that the [Apollo 8](#) mission attempt a lunar orbit, an ambitious change from previous plans. Gilruth agreed. At 0900, Low met with flight-director Chris Kraft, who verified the technical feasibility. At 0930 Low, Gilruth, and Kraft agreed to present the idea to Werner von Braun. They flew to Huntsville to meet von Braun and others at 1430 that afternoon. The lunar orbit plan was tentatively approved that day. Just 4 months later, Apollo 8 orbited the moon, sending back the first photograph of an Earthrise over another world.

Think what Low accomplished in the time that many present-day beaurocrats take to select their fonts and backgrounds. He achieved consensus on a billion- dollar decision about one of the most complex engineering projects of all time, with enormous implications for national security. PowerPoint cannot help you do that.

In current-day NASA, the need to cram complex facts into PowerPoint's limited format may have contributed to poor decisions in the Columbia tragedy, according to a recent essay by the graphic designer, Edward Tufte.[\[4\]](#) Tufte points out that the limited resolution of PowerPoint slides makes it impossible to fit complex charts and graphs, or even full English sentences. As a result the intended meaning of a presentation may be obscured.

How can you make informed decisions like George Low's? The key seems to be to gather experts who are knowledgeable and passionate about the subject matter, and have them cooperatively discuss a series of questions designed to explore the limits of technical feasibility. They must strive to reach the best decision rather than to persuade each other. The Chicago Tribune [\[5\]](#) quotes Sherry Turkle, from Massachusetts Institute of Technology: "a strong [PowerPoint] presentation is designed to close down debate, not open it up"

Design your presentations and your meetings to take advantage of the people gathered there, not to bore them. If everyone has set their remarks in stone ahead of time (all using the same templates) then there is little room for the comments of one to build on another, or for a new idea to arise collaboratively from the meeting. Homogeneity is great for milk, but not for ideas. Use visual aids to convey visual information: photographs, charts, or diagrams. But do not use them to give the impression that the matter is solved, wrapped up in a few bullet points.

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- [1] Parker I. [Absolute Powerpoint](#). New Yorker Magazine, May 28, 2001:76.
- [2] Norvig P. *The Gettysburg Powerpoint presentation*. January, 1999: <http://norvig.com/Gettysburg> (accessed July 2, 2003).
- [3] Wade M. *Decision that Apollo 8 should be a lunar orbital mission*. SpaceDaily, June 26, 2002 <http://www.astronautix.com/details/dec17988.htm> (accessed July 2, 2003).
- [4] Tufte E. The cognitive style of PowerPoint. May, 2003: <http://www.edwardtufte.com> (accessed July 2, 2003).
- [5] Keller J. [Is PowerPoint the devil?](#) Chicago Tribune, Jan 22, 2003.
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Not on Agenda!

- Dedicate
- Consecrate
- Hallow
(in narrow sense)
- Add or detract
- Note or remember what we say

11/19/1863

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Four score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent a new nation, conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal. Now we are engaged in a great civil war, testing whether that nation or any nation so conceived and so dedicated can long endure. We are met on a great battlefield of that war. We have come to dedicate a portion of that field as a final resting-place for those who here gave their lives that that nation might live. It is altogether fitting and proper that we should do this. But in a larger sense, we cannot dedicate, we cannot consecrate, we cannot hallow this ground. The brave men, living and dead who struggled here have consecrated it far above our poor power to add or detract. The world will little note nor long remember what we say here, but it can never forget what they did here. It is for us the living rather to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced. It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us--that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion--that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain, that this nation under God shall have a new birth of freedom, and that government of the people, by the people, for the people shall not perish from the earth.

-- Abraham Lincoln