Results of the 2015 Annoying PowerPoint survey

While presentations are becoming the default communication vehicle in organizations, audiences don't feel presenters are taking the time necessary to create or deliver effective presentations.

When looking at the responses from the 453 people who completed the 2015 survey on what annoys them about PowerPoint presentations, a clear message stood out: audiences feel that too many presenters don't care enough about their audience to spend the time necessary to create and deliver a good presentation. That might sound like a harsh conclusion, but the hundreds of comments I reviewed make it clear that many presenters are not willing to learn the skills necessary or take the time to prepare properly.
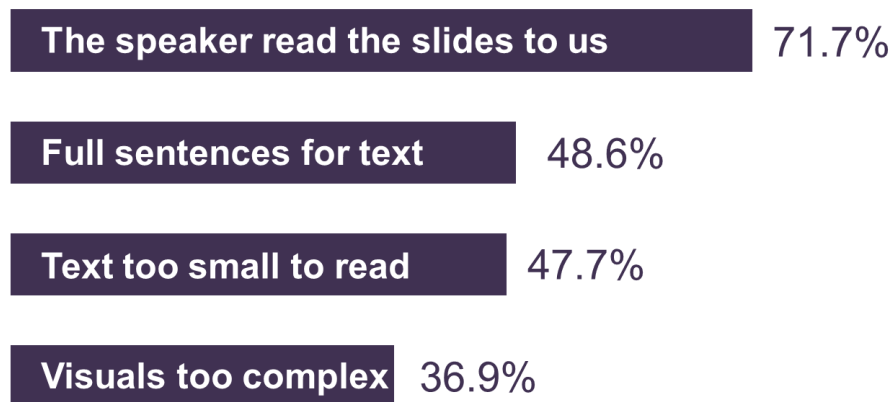
Presentations are becoming the default method for communicating in organizations

I hear it often in my customized workshops and the results of the survey back it up: PowerPoint presentations are the expected way to communicate in organizations today. Whether that is a good thing or not, professionals are expected to deliver updates, analysis, and recommendations using PowerPoint. In this survey, 27.4% of the respondents said they see at least one presentation per day every day of the work week. This is up from the 2013 survey result of 22.6% and almost double the result from just six years ago.

PowerPoint is just a tool, and like any other tool, it can be used to create many different outputs. Not every PowerPoint will be a presentation. Some are reports (known as slidedocs, a term used by Nancy Duarte in her free e-book Slidedocs), some are posters, some are infographics, and there are a host of other visual outputs that you can create. The problem comes when a presenter uses a document as a presentation. Numerous respondents shared their frustration that documents should be emailed instead of presented.

Reading slides is still the biggest issue, but complex visuals are an emerging problem

Here are the top four responses and the percentage of respondents that selected them (while I asked people to select just three of the twelve choices, some selected more than three):

The speaker read the slides to us	71.7%
Full sentences for text	48.6%
Text too small to read	47.7%
Visuals too complex	36.9%

It continues to amaze me how many presenters read their slides to the audience. In every one of the seven surveys I have conducted this is clearly the single most annoying thing a presenter can do. Why does this happen so often? The overload of text on slides is the primary culprit. That is why the second and third most common answers in the survey on what annoys audience about bad PowerPoint presentations are related to filling the slides with text.

The response that stood out for me this time was the emergence of overly complex visuals as a clear fourth most popular answer. Since I requested that people only select their top three, the text heavy answers have always been far ahead of any other response. The proportion of people selecting the issue of visuals being too complex and confusing jumped significantly from past surveys and was clearly ahead of the rest of the responses. This is important because as presenters move to use visuals, they need to make sure that those visuals are clear and easy to understand, an issue many audiences members are highlighting in this survey.

Overload in presentations is still the biggest issue

Again in this survey I asked people to tell me three words or phrases that they hear most often when people talk about PowerPoint presentations in their organization. I created a word cloud of the popular words.

It was not surprising to see the word "boring" stand out as the most popular word. As I have said in the past, I think the word "boring" is not the primary issue, but happens when the person mentally "checks out" during the presentation. As we saw in the last survey when this question was asked for the first time, words such as "much", "long", and "many" are prominent and indicate the overload of information that many presentations suffer from. When an audience member is being read to or is overwhelmed with information, they give up trying to follow the presenter and quickly become bored. In some organizations today, people actually get up and leave the room when this happens.

Presenters need to improve their PowerPoint skills

I allow people to add additional comments on what annoys them about PowerPoint presentations and I always get hundreds of comments. It takes a while to go through them and determine the themes. This year, three themes emerged, and they are all connected by the strong comment I shared at the start about too many presenters not respecting their audiences enough to spend the necessary time preparing for the presentation. Because the survey is anonymous, the respondents share strongly worded comments that show the deep level of frustration at the practices of many presenters.

The first theme that emerged was that many presenters don't want to take the time to learn the skills in PowerPoint that would help them use it well. Skills like:

- Properly using the Slide Master to create slides that have a consistent look
- Learning to use the animation feature to build content on slides instead of displaying everything at once or using goofy animation that distracts the audience
- Learning when to use different visuals like graphs or diagrams and how to create them quickly and clearly
- Using Slide Show mode when presenting instead of Edit mode (it shocks me that this is still mentioned multiple times every survey)
- The best way to incorporate multimedia so it works every time and is easy to see and hear

Because presenters don't take the time to learn how to use the tool well, they take much longer to create effective visual slides. In fact, my observation is that many presenters think it takes too long to create visuals. They don't have that time, so they default back to slides full of text, which leads to reading the slides, and we know that is the most annoying thing you can do as a presenter. If you invest some time to learn these skills, you will find that creating effective graphs, diagrams, and organized text is much easier than you think. It doesn't take that much more time than filling a slide with text and it is much more effective for communicating with the audience.

Presenters need to take the time to prepare a clear message

The second theme that emerged from reviewing the comments is that presenters are not taking the time to create a message that is clear and concise. Too often we see presentations that have been quickly pulled together using slides from other presentations. The presenter hopes that the audience won't notice the different formatting of the slides and that they will figure out what the message is supposed to be. It is clear from the comments that audiences can instantly tell that the presentation isn't well planned and it is a collection of previous slides.

Audiences don't expect to have to figure out the message of the presentation. The presenter should be the one to consider the needs of the audience and tailor the presentation of the message just for that group. Using a set of slides from someone else or the one you used for a different group isn't going to leave a good impression.

Audiences also don't like it when the presenter doesn't take the time to focus the presentation and instead dumps everything they know about the subject onto crowded slides. Many presenters use the excuse that the slides have to serve two purposes: 1) the presentation, and 2) a stand-alone document for those who could not attend the presentation. That is why the

slides have to be crowded and there are so many of them. This is simply not the case. I teach my workshop participants to put additional detail in hidden slides that can be accessed if necessary, but are still in the same file so that those who receive it by email will have all the detail they need. These approaches will work, but presenters have to be willing to take the time to learn and implement them.

Presenters need to take the time to prepare to deliver the presentation

The third theme that emerged from the comments was that presenters are not taking the time to be fully ready to deliver the presentation. Before they start rehearsing their presentation, they should go through the slides to check for such issues as: spelling errors, colors that are hard to see, fonts that are too small or hard to read, low quality images that appear fuzzy, content that has been stolen from a website and could result in legal action, and mis-aligned objects. If you only notice these issues when you are presenting, you end up apologizing for the mistake, which doesn't look good.

Presenters also need to rehearse their presentation. Rehearsal involves standing and delivering the presentation as it will be done on the day of the presentation. It is not just flipping through the slides on your laptop the morning of the presentation. When you rehearse, you become familiar with the flow and the content of the presentation. You won't be surprised by a slide when it appears on the screen. You will know how long it takes to deliver the presentation and you can adjust the content if needed. This avoids rushing through the slides or running over time, annoyances cited numerous times by those who filled out the survey.

When you have rehearsed and are comfortable with your presentation, you can deliver confidently while speaking to the audience. This prevents you facing the screen and reading the slides. I have seen this too often, and the survey comments reinforced that it still happens way too much.

Advice from the Audience: Clarity of message, of slides, and of delivery

For the first time in this survey I decided to ask audience members what advice they would give presenters on how to create and deliver more effective presentations. After reviewing all of their suggestions, the most important advice they have for presenters is to be clear: clear on the message, clear slides, and clear delivery. This reinforces and builds on what I heard from the comments above.

Audiences expect the presenter to have defined the goal of the presentation. Too often the presentation is just a collection of slides that don't seem to have any purpose. Audiences consider this a waste of their time. Presenters need to consider the audience they will be speaking to and what that audience needs to hear. Don't tell them all you know, carefully select just the points that will help deliver the important message you want them to leave with. If you are asking someone to attend a presentation, make sure they will find it a worthwhile investment of their time.

Once you have planned a clear message, the audience wants every slide you use to be clear as well. More than a few respondents advised presenters to limit yourself to only one point per slide. Have a headline that summarizes the message and an effective visual instead of a slide full of text. It's not that your slides can't have any text, but if you are using text, make sure it is big enough to read and the text is not your speaking notes. If you have planned your message

well, it is easier to avoid overloading your slides, which is another recommendation for the survey respondents. After your slides are done, test them from the audience perspective. This includes testing them in the room you are using to make sure that they are big enough, and reviewing them with someone who can give you the viewpoint of someone who will be in the audience.

When it comes to delivering the presentation, audiences want it to be clear and polished. Many comments were made about presenters stumbling through their content and apologizing to the audience. This can be avoided if you rehearse your presentation. When you know your content and your slides well, you will also avoid facing the screen and reading the slides. This drives audiences crazy and they desperately want presenters to stop wasting their time by reading out loud what could have been just sent by email.

The survey results reinforce that I still have lots of presenters to help; here are some resources to get started

In my customized workshops, books, and website content, I have focused on helping professionals create presentations that have a clear message, focused content, and effective visuals. I have developed my content based on what I see in the sample presentations that I review and the discussions that happen in the workshops. It is clear from the survey results that audiences want me to keep sharing these ideas, as they are exactly what presenters need to hear. To help presenters get started, I want to share a list of articles and resources. I've divided the list based on topic area. Most are links to articles or other free resources, and some are links to my books or videos. To go further in depth with these topics, check out my [books](#) or attend one of my [customized workshops](#).

Improving your PowerPoint skills

Tutorials: [PowerPoint tutorials on Indezine.com](#)

Tutorials: [PowerPoint how-to videos](#)

[Tutorials to create effective visuals in PowerPoint product](#)

Creating a clear message

Article: [Determining the goal of your presentation is not as easy as you think](#)

Article: [Use a GPS approach to planning your presentation](#)

Article: [The importance of a goal and agenda at the start of your presentation](#)

Article: [Updating the three "Tell'em" approach to planning your message](#)

Article: [Three questions that help you make wise decisions when planning a presentation](#)

Article: [Three lessons from TED talks that reinforce the survey findings](#)

Article: [How to eliminate 75% of the numbers on many spreadsheet slides](#)

[Present It So They Get It book](#) that details my six step RAPIDS approach to planning your presentation

[Slidedocs ebook](#) by Nancy Duarte when what you are creating is a document, not a presentation

Creating clear slides

Article: [Use the 3R's technique to reduce the text on slides](#)

Article: [The difference between the message and supporting information](#)

Article: [Making text information more visual](#)

E-course: [Alternatives to bullet point text](#)

Article: [Why SmartArt is often misused](#)

Article: [Where to download over 4,000 pre-made diagrams for free](#)

[Select Effective Visuals book](#) that shows how to select the best visual for the common messages in business presentations

[Ebook on moving backup data to hidden slides in the same PowerPoint file](#)

Getting prepared to present

Article: [Five tests you should apply to your slides](#)

Article: [Why it is important to hook your audience at the start of your presentation](#)

Articles: Two articles ([here](#) and [here](#)) on how to stop looking at the screen when presenting

Article: [Why building the elements on your slide helps your audience](#)

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