

Too Much Text!

My friend and colleague, Dave Paradi, conducts a biennial poll on the aspects of PowerPoint that annoy people. Most people talk with abstraction about their objections with the software; Dave actually finds out and quantifies it (thinkoutsidetheslide.com/survey2007.htm). And since 2005, the issue of text on a slide, too much text, to be specific, has never *not* been ranked in the top three of PowerPoint annoyances.

So this topic strikes me as the ideal place to begin the discussion on slide design. And because I'm not actually a graphic designer by trade, I will not attempt to create jaw-droppingly beautiful slides that might inspire and intimidate you.

Instead, my goal for everything we do in this chapter and the ones that follow is to make you think *hey, I can do that*.

Why Do We Create So Much Text?

We have identified four legitimate reasons why well-intentioned content creators feel compelled to overload their slides with text. Some are easy to resolve, others not so easy—and in all cases, the text creates one of the most insidious barriers to a presenter being able to connect with his or her audience.

Here, for your reading enjoyment, are The Four Reasons Why Excessive Text Can Ruin Your Day.

1. You do not know any better

We spoke about this way back in Chapter 1 when we sketched one of the typical profiles of the PowerPoint user: the person who comes to the software from other Office apps and has no idea that a quick copy-and-paste from Word could lead to Death by PowerPoint.

If this is you, you're easy. You have not yet formed a multitude of bad habits. You simply followed your instincts and thought that the stuff you wrote in Word would work as well in PowerPoint. You simply need to learn about the foundation of what makes for good presentation content, and with few preconceived notions already in place, that training would likely go quickly and without trauma.

You are the easiest to address. You create slides like the one in Figure 17.1 (repeated from Chapter 2) because that is the only way you have known how to tell a story or deliver a message. You don't have bad habits; you have no habits, and that is a much better thing.

Figure 17.1

A person with no experience whatsoever with presentation design is liable to overcreate his or her slides.

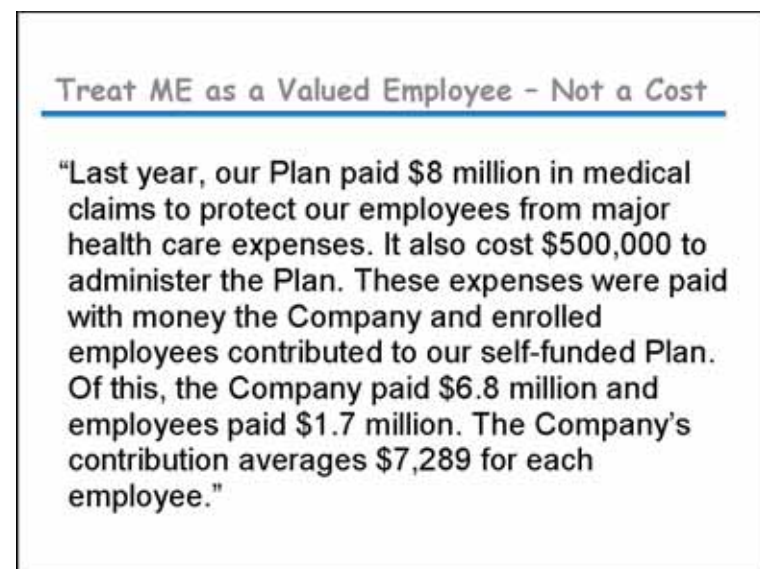


Figure 17.2

Can one slide sum up everything that is wrong with presentation visuals? Maybe so...



2. You are addicted

Your situation is more complicated than the person who simply doesn't know any better. You might very well know better, but you cannot help yourself. You do not feel comfortable unless everything you want to say is displayed before you. You don't feel as if you can function...you become paralyzed...you feel naked. Without your safety net of a fully-composed script being projected before you, you lose your composure and your poise.

Figure 17.2 will look familiar to those who read Chapter 14. It is the quintessential poster child for the too-much-text syndrome. My conversations with the client who created this slide were, all at once, educational, amusing, exasperating, and telling:

Me: Why do you want all of that text on the screen?

Him: I just feel more comfortable with it.

Me: What if we kept all of the high-level ideas but removed the detail?

Him: That would not be acceptable.



Me: How about if we compromised at two levels of text?

Him: No, I want all of it there. I concentrate better with it there and I'm more comfortable, knowing that even if I forget something, they'll be able to read it.



Although I didn't have the heart, it was my obligation as his hired consultant to find a way to tell him that his audience will never be able to read all of it, and worse, they cannot give him the attention he deserves with a backdrop of all of that drek. He listened, nodded, and then said, "Well, that's my style and I'm not going to change it."

It might as well have been crack cocaine we're talking about here—he could not function without it. He was addicted. And I had no opportunity to conduct an intervention—he let me go a few weeks later.

Are you like my former client? Do we need to send you through detox? And what does detox look like with respect to text addiction? I actually have some experience in this matter...lucky me...

1. The first time you, the addict, try to deliver one of your standard presentations without your usual verbose slides, you feel awkward and lost. You don't know what to look at, you have difficulty keeping your train of thought, and you get thrown off by the fact that your audience is (perhaps for the first time) looking at you.
2. The second time is a bit better, as you realize that you must compose your thoughts from what you know, not from what you can read on the screen. It is still scary for you but there are moments when you connect with audience members in a way that you never had before. You want to feel that way again.
3. By your third attempt, you own it. You are more comfortable sharing ideas that come from your heart and your experience and you not only enjoy the better contact with the audience, you begin to crave it. It's like a high.

► PowerPoint's Rehearse Timings feature can help as you practice speaking without all that text. It can help you accurately gauge whether you are staying on schedule.

You realize what I'm suggesting here—you have traded one addiction for another. The feeling of true audience engagement is so intoxicating, it is not long before you feel as if you cannot live without it!

This is a good trade.

3. You want your slides to double as handouts

You are not going to like me for this discussion, because while trying to improve the quality of your work, I'm going to hurt the quality of your worklife. I'm both mindful of and sympathetic to of the demands that are placed on presentation designers and creators in today's workforce. Your deadlines are often ridiculous. Nonetheless, I must tell you this:

In 15 years as a presentation consultant, I have not once seen a slide deck that successfully functions as both compelling visual content and informative written material. Not once.

There is just no getting around it: if you create slides for your presentation that follow the ideas laid forth in this book—or the ones authored by Garr Reynolds, Nancy Duarte, Cliff Atkinson, or countless others—those slides will necessarily fail as printouts. And if you create slides that contain fleshed out thoughts for audience members to review afterward, you create instant Death by PowerPoint were you to project them.

These two purposes are hopelessly disparate—the twain shall never meet. And yet you are likely one of tens of thousands who attempt it on a weekly or maybe even daily basis.

My clients and my readers never like to hear it, but it is my duty to inform them nonetheless that they must create two documents in order to do this right. Stay tuned, however, for a creative solution that assuages some of the pain.

4. You are required to

We acknowledge that there are circumstances in which a presenter feels compelled, or is literally required, to read a passage of carefully-composed text and display that same text.

I refer you to Page 9 for the two universal axioms of PowerPoint that describe what happens if you attempt this without special training. There are few things in life more annoying than when a presenter displays fully-formed sentences on screen and then proceeds to read them. And yet, in our travels, we have identified numerous situations in which that very practice is required:

- An annual shareholders meeting, in which the presenter has a fiduciary responsibility to report both visually and verbally.
- A pet-adoption clinic that offers an orientation for new pet owners, including lots of DOs and DON'Ts.
- An airline's maintenance training program, in which proper procedure and protocol are of paramount importance.

In all of these cases, ensuring that the message is delivered takes precedence over the elegance of that delivery and we do not fault department heads for erring on the side of over-delivering a message, rather than under-delivering it.

And yet, we know what happens to audience members who get hammered with text—they tune out. Therefore, we refer you back to the sidebar on Page 46 and to the case study upcoming for our recommendation on how to deal with this reality.

Case Studies in Text Reduction

Several significant phenomena take place when you succeed in reducing the amount of text that appears on your slides. Here is a digest of the discussion back on Page 42 where we introduce the Three-Word Challenge:

- Your slides are friendlier.
- Your pace improves.
- You create intrigue.
- You learn your material better.

There is one other important benefit: you become a better slide designer. It is entirely possible that the reason you do not feel confident designing a slide is because you have never had the opportunity. The most accomplished artists wouldn't fare well when faced with slides that contain five and six bullet points, all complete sentences. But when you open up some real estate, you give yourself the opportunity, perhaps for the first time, to think about how an idea could be expressed visually.

That would be a liberation—a deliverance!—for you and for anyone whose PowerPoint career has been defined by excessive text.

The following accounts are proof positive that reducing the amount of words that appear on a slide creates a more rewarding experience for everyone concerned.

Southern California Edison and the Postage Stamp Syndrome

When the largest utility company in the western United States contacted us for presentation help, we knew that we would see some old habits that would die very hard. Edison's "Enterprise Resource Planning" rollout proved to be a difficult initiative to explain.

1 Slides like this one didn't help. I asked why there was a little photo of a man staring off the slide (I was more diplomatic than that), and the answer was telling: "We wanted to break up the text a bit."

My clients' instincts were correct about providing relief from the text, but adding a tiny photo isn't the answer. In fact, a photo like this serves only to add to the visual clutter. I call this the "postage stamp syndrome"—one of several knee-jerk responses that we regularly observe to the problem of too much text.

2 We insisted that the creative team at Edison take the Three-Word Challenge and they were equal to the task. Look at all of that fat that they identified...

3 Immediately upon removing the excess verbiage, one of the team members said, "Wow, look at that poor guy stuck in the middle of nowhere." Indeed, the postage stamp seemed even more out of place when swimming in all of that wonderful white space. It was as if he were now screaming out to be made larger and more prominent.

Slide 1: "Who will ERP Impact?"

- ERP impacts different people in different ways, depending on their role
- All Edison employees will directly experience at least some of the changes brought by ERP, including new ways to:
 - Process expense reports
 - Submit vacation requests
 - Register for training
- Even retirees, suppliers and vendors may experience changes
- The ERP program rolls out over several years, so not everyone will be impacted at the same time

Enterprise Resource Planning

1

Slide 2: "Who will ERP Impact?"

- ERP impact different people in different ways, depending on their role
- All Edison employees will directly experience at least some of the changes brought by ERP, including new ways to:
 - Process expense reports
 - Submit vacation requests
 - Register for training
- Even retirees, suppliers and vendors may experience changes
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Enterprise Resource Planning

2

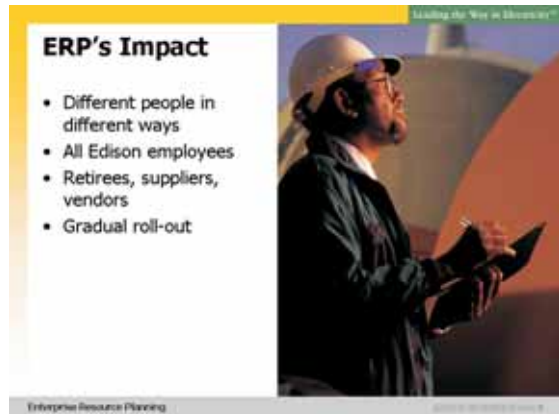
Slide 3: "ERP's Impact"

- Different people in different ways
- All Edison employees
- Retirees, suppliers, vendors
- Gradual roll-out

Enterprise Resource Planning

3

4 Once we sized the photo to its full height, it became even more apparent that having him looking off the slide was not such a good idea. When he was just a postage stamp, my clients barely even noticed him. But with the opportunity to actually see elements for what they are, the Edison folks began to think more like designers.



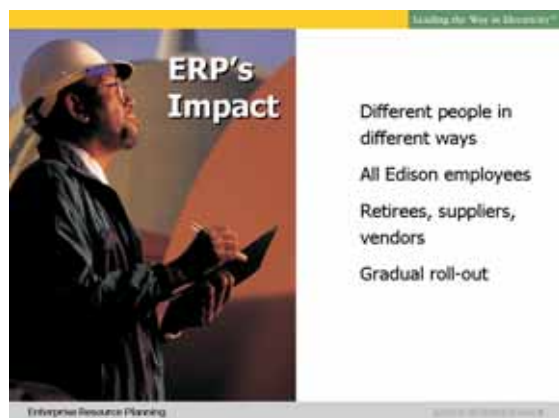
4

5 Moving him to the other side of the slide was the cognitive leap that had the biggest impact, and I remember well the “a-ha” moment that occurred when that move in turn suggested that the text be shifted to the right. At this point, the slide would have been deemed ready for its debut.



5

6 I suggested two additional tweaks—moving the headline into the photo and removing the bullet characters from the text. The first serves to integrate the two elements better and the second reflects my general desire to remove bullets when they are not needed. With a short list like this, I believe that the bullet characters serve no real purpose, and the slide looks less “PowerPointish” without them.



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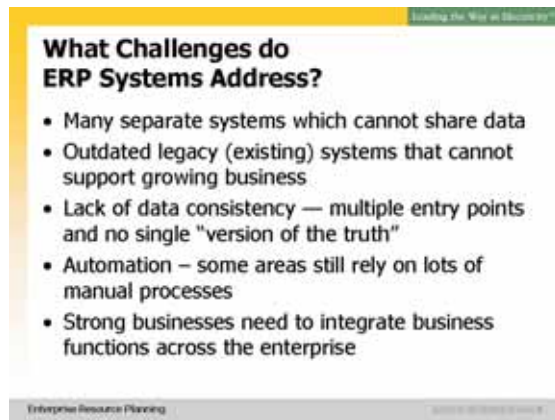
7 It didn't take the design team long to seek other opportunities to create a better visual impact. The very next slide was another paragon of text excess, screaming to be delivered from its purgatory.

8 Distilling this slide was easier—practice makes perfect—and the presenting team acknowledged that they could do just fine with the key talking points.

Getting buy-in from the presenters to undertake this kind of paradigm shift is vital. We also find it is easier to get their endorsement than you might think. They usually welcome the opportunity to be different and distinctive.

9 The new slide design practically presented itself. This photo was purchased from photos.com and the areas of open space were perfect for the remaining text. Using the subtle drop shadows helped readability in areas where there was not high contrast.

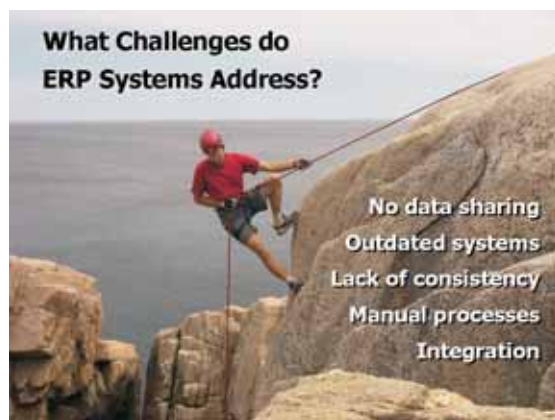
▼ Download 17-03.ppt to see the progressions of these two redesigned slides.



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