

# Getting more out of PowerPoint®

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## Abstract

PowerPoint® is unavoidable in today's society. It is equally loved and hated. Although it is ubiquitous, many users of the program fail to understand why their presentations are not achieving the desired effects. The answer to this lies in part with the information summarising function that is central to PowerPoint. In addition, users are often unaware of keyboard shortcuts which would help them to improve the flow of their own presentations. There are free alternatives to PowerPoint as well as very professional templates available online which may also help to improve presentation styles.

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## 'We have met the enemy, and he is PowerPoint'

This was the dramatic heading in a New York Times story in 2010 on US military strategy in Afghanistan.<sup>1</sup> 'When we understand that slide, we'll have won the war', General McChrystal is reported to have dryly remarked (see Figure 1). While medical writers might not be part of complex military planning, how many times have you seen a PowerPoint® presentation only to be similarly bewildered by what it was all about? Strange, isn't it? Especially, since PowerPoint is supposed to be a communication aid. (As an aside, how often have you seen that iconic PowerPoint image of a stickman scratching his head appear in meetings you have attended? A comment on the presentation itself perhaps?) (Figure 1).

A lot of the negative comments about PowerPoint also relate to the information organising function, which is intrinsic to any presentation created with the program. As one author noted, 'It helps you make a case, but it also makes its own case: about how to organise information, how much information to organise, how to look at the world'.<sup>2</sup> In fairness, PowerPoint has not helped to deflect such

criticism by including elements like 'auto-content'. Yes, if you need to create slides on - 'Managing Organisational Change' or 'Communicating Bad News' - PowerPoint already has the content for you! This feature used to be built in to every version of PowerPoint but is now a wizard, 'which automatically generates a presentation with generic content based on information that the user entered in the wizard'.<sup>3</sup> Apparently the name 'auto-content' started as an internal joke, one that Microsoft took and ran with!<sup>2</sup>

'According to most studies, people's number one fear is public speaking. Number two is death. Death is number two. Does that sound right? That means to the average person, if you have to go to a funeral, you're better off in the casket than doing the eulogy.'

- Jerry Seinfeld<sup>4</sup>

The Seinfeld quote goes a long way to explaining the popularity of PowerPoint. It calls to mind Lang's famous (and overused and unsourced I admit!) quote about statistics, 'He uses statistics as a drunken man uses lamp-posts...for support rather than illumination'. It makes sense. If the presenter is in any way unsure about presenting, the attention is focused on the screen and not on themselves for the duration of the presentation. But does what suits the presenter suit the audience? The Swiss Anti-PowerPoint political party is unlikely to agree with this.<sup>5</sup>

The fact that some people are presenting when they would rather be dead is obvious to many in the audience (who feel like they *are* dying). Would be novelists are always being urged to show, not tell. How many times have you attended a PowerPoint presentation where you were not only shown but told the exact same? Usually, by a presenter who has to awkwardly rubberneck to the screen behind them ensuring that they sound like someone shouting in the wind.

## Afghanistan Stability / COIN Dynamics

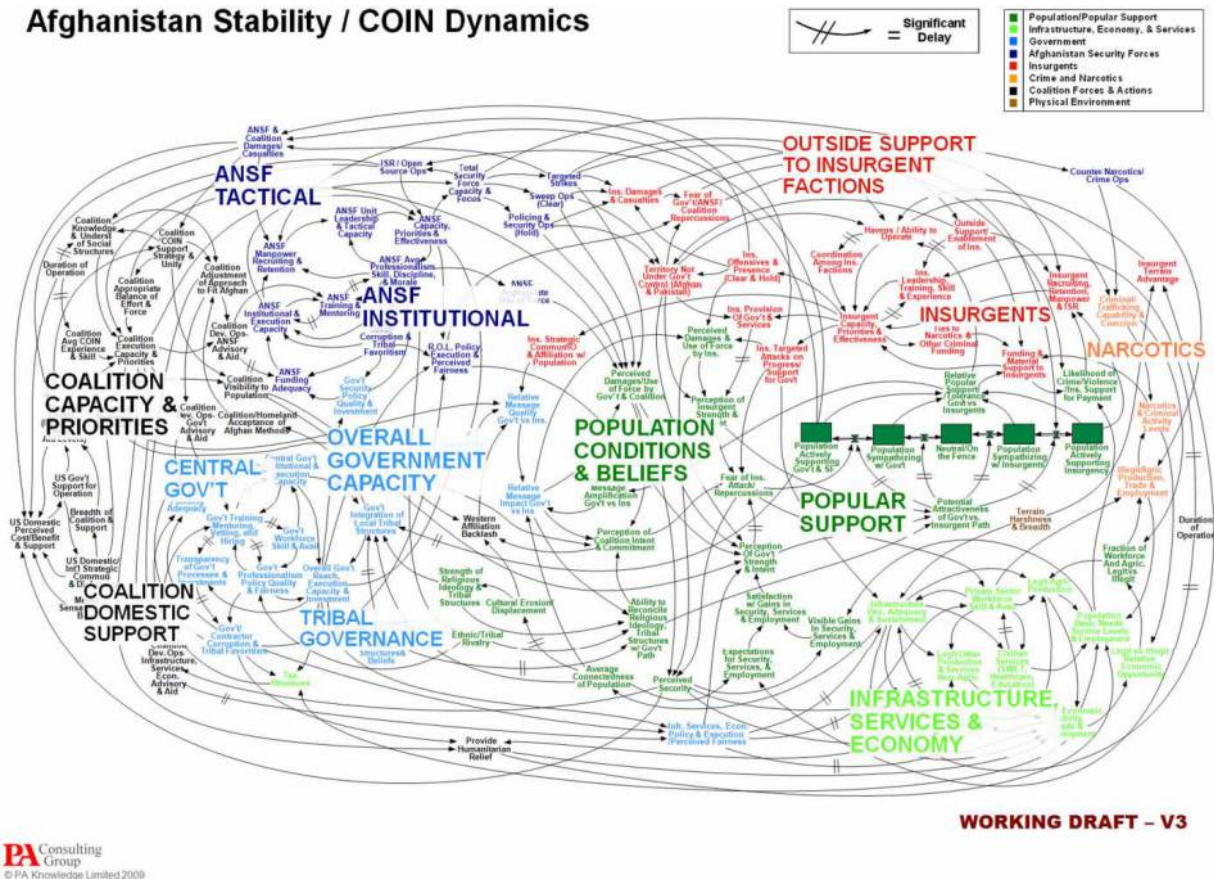


Figure 1: The PowerPoint slide that baffled the American military.

### Alternatives to PowerPoint

Do not have the money for PowerPoint software? Then, download Apache OpenOffice, which is an open-source office productivity software suite (<http://www.openoffice.org>). This free software includes a presentation application which allows you to save presentations in the PowerPoint format.

### Before your presentation

It should go without saying, but unfortunately it does need to be said:

- Make it easy on your audience.
- Do not overload your slides with information.
- Do not choose a font that is too small or unreadable.
- Do not overdo animation and if the thought ever crosses your mind that it would be a good idea to use different colours for different sentences, get up from your desk and go for a long walk.
- Consistently use the same font face and sizes on all slides. Like multi-coloured sentences, it irritates the audience when every slide feels like a style ambush.

*Be realistic about the number of slides*

Too many people overestimate how many slides they need. Assuming you know what you are talking about, the oft quoted phrase of one slide per minute is far too optimistic. Just think, each slide usually contains up to five lines or points. At one slide per minute you are allocating about 12 seconds to each item. This is the reason why many people end up having to skip over slides during their presentations or racing through them, clicking onto the next slide before the audience have even read half of the one they were on.

*Use a good template*

If you do not already have a predefined company template, use a good one. The following websites have a large selection of free PowerPoint templates on a variety of topics:

<http://tinyurl.com/98o7678>: This redirection link will bring you to the official Microsoft site which contains some very advanced templates – an animated spinning globe, for example. One to visit for when you need to impress!

<http://www.slideshare.net>: This site is actually also useful for content ideas. A go-to resource for when you have to put together a presentation in a very short time.

### Get help

Stuck while putting your presentation together? The F1 button will open the help box in PowerPoint. If you cannot find the answer there, I find doing a simple Internet search for *How to do XYZ in PowerPoint* usually reveals what I need to know.

### Rehearse

Obviously, before you actually give your presentation you have to rehearse it for timing reasons but also to make sure that you have correctly programmed any slide transitions or animations. This is something which is easy to forget, especially since most people just whizz through slides, but crucially do not play them, prior to giving the presentation.

## During your presentation

### Start on the right foot with F5

To start playing a presentation from the first slide, press F5.

### Need a pointer?

Forgot to bring a pointer? Not a problem. Just press A or = to have one appear onscreen which you can manoeuvre with your mouse. Press the same button again to make it disappear.

### Create a blank screen

Ever given a presentation which ignited debate in the audience? If you feel that the focus is temporarily on the discussion happening and not on your presentation, simply press W for a white screen or B for a black screen. This will stop the audience from being distracted. Once you are ready to continue press the same button again. If the need arises, you can also stop or restart an automatic presentation (i.e. one which is looping) by pressing S.

### Jump to the right slide when you need it

How many times have you seen someone flicking back through 30 or so slides during the Q&A section at the end of their presentation to find and re-show a slide from near the start of the presentation? There is no need for this. Simply press and hold the right and left mouse buttons for 2 seconds to return to the first slide and advance the presentation from there. This trick does take a bit of practice though. Alternatively, if you know the slide number you want to go to, while the

presentation is running just type in the slide number +ENTER to go directly to it.

### Further information on shortcuts

You can find more useful shortcuts at the official Microsoft site. Go to <http://tinyurl.com/2837dz3> to be redirected there.

## After your presentation

In the same way as business people ignore all of the research that says brainstorming is ineffective, PowerPoint is unlikely to go away anytime soon. So, do yourself a favour and try to improve your PowerPoint presentations. Dozens of people in darkened rooms over the course of your career will thank you for it! Who knows? Maybe like Al Gore you will make the leap and turn your PowerPoint presentation into a best-selling book and film!

A quote from the US military opened this article, so I will give them the dubious honour of closing it too. Good luck with your future presentations!

‘PowerPoint makes us stupid.’

– Gen. James N. Mattis of the Marine Corps, the Joint Forces commander.<sup>1</sup>

## Conflicts of interest and disclaimers

Please note that any tips relate to the PowerPoint software version 2010. Some features or the actual path to get to certain features may differ on your version of PowerPoint.

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*Marketing for Medical Writers.* In his day job, he spends an inordinate amount of time preparing PowerPoint presentations.

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## Author information

**Diarmuid De Faoite** is best known as the EMWA Website Manager and leader of the workshop *An Introduction to*