

Eight Power Pointers for PowerPoint (and Other Presentation Packages)

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You have probably observed the rush to add digital components to your presentations, both in and out of court. The fear of losing connection with a digitally acclimated audience, and that, or of being perceived as unprepared or incompetent without digital enhancements has driven us to extremes of boredom and ineffectiveness.

Whether you use Microsoft's PowerPoint, available at <http://www.microsoft.com>, or the free OpenOffice, available at <http://www.openoffice.org>, or any other package, there are at least eight pointers one could apply to make sure your message gets through the fog of audience perception. Let's look at them:

You are the show. The center of attention is you, not the computer presentation, the images, or any other disturbance. No computerized whiz-bang animation, in and of itself, will save a sleep-inducing slide into the swamp of irrelevance. Practice your presentation in front of other lawyers or in front of mock juries. There is an organization called Toastmasters International that offers opportunities for practicing your public speaking, along with helpful feedback. There are Toastmasters clubs all over the world that meet every day and at about any time you would want to meet. You can locate one near you online at <http://www.toastmasters.org>.

Fewer words. If you have a choice about the words to place on a slide (and you always do), use fewer words. Many slides I have seen have a heading and seven or eight points. The speaker reads the heading, starts reading the checklist, and, by item number six, I am nodding off. Why? Because I can read the points faster than the speaker can hit them. If you want some suspense, you could use what is called a "build" that allows you to bring each point onto the screen as you mention it. Better yet, put the detailed steps in handouts your listeners will take home and use later. An effective way of doing this is to load the full presentation material, including headings, follow-up points, and citations, into your presentation software, save that material in the

format for thumbnail handout production, then go back and throw away everything on the slides for your live presentation except the headings. Make them big and legible so people know where you are in your outline.

No fine print. Your live presentation should not be cursed with endless columns of illegible material. The nearsighted will simply zone out because your screen will look like a blur to them. There may be situations where material has to be placed in context so that the original, though illegible, must appear. An effective technique is to enlarge what you want the audience to look at, as long as that enlargement is consistent with the rules of evidence.

Be comfortable. Know your software and hardware. Read books, help files, and get on Internet mail lists that deal with your hardware and software so you can keep up with new ideas and fix bugs as they arise.

Be ready for failure. This can come from any direction. Be ready to step immediately to a non-computerized presentation at any time. Go early and check out the place where you are delivering your presentation. Know the location of light switches, microphone plugs, and electrical outlets, and who and where you go for help when (not if) the problems come. Carry extra batteries, light globes, backup hardware and software, or plan to work around any technical contingency.

Use the features you have already bought. Inside each software package, you will find a number of tools. Become familiar with them. One of my favorites is the group of presentation design templates that most presentation packages have. These are designed by experts, and you can use them to fill in gaps in your presentations. One of our biggest problems is that, because we are experts in what we know, while telling others about what we know we are likely to make intellectual leaps and assumptions that will leave our message unconveyed. The templates ask you, the expert in your case, what your audience wants to know about your case so you can fill in those leaps and assumptions. You will be answering questions as they arise in your listeners' minds, which will add to your listeners' perceptions of your knowledge and credibility.

Use color effectively. Color can set a mood, create contrast, and generate interest. Become familiar with the psychological literature on the shaping of perceptions with color.

Don't bore us. Avoid boredom by showing the connection of your idea or proposition to vital interests that we commonly share.