An Art Historian's Design Tips for Effective PowerPoint Presentations

Before you start — you know your own material best. So just select from below what makes sense to you.   Some of these are my personal preferences, some I grabbed from other lists and tip sheets that I particularly agree with.

We have all seen **great PowerPoint design** (what is legible, easy to follow, impactful) and **awful PowerPoint design** (amateurish, hard to read, or merely banal).   A truly great presentation will not leave you remembering the PowerPoint, but the images and the story being told.

1. PowerPoints are for **PICTURES** and **GRAPHICS**. If you are using them primarily for text, why not just make a handout? Your presentation will be more powerful if you engage your audience's eyes towards you, not a screen. A well-crafted handout will perpetuate your talk beyond the moment, and give your listeners food for thought afterwards. Not every presentation needs a PowerPoint.

2. Dump the **pre-made templates** and "**themes**". Distracting and fidgety extras on the screen only detract from your content. Most are banal or outright ugly. In general, except in special circumstances, avoid tacky clip art in favor of quality, meaningful photographs.

3. A **plain black background** will make your pictures look a lot better.   A **glaring white background** <u>detracts</u> from pictures and is much more tiring on the eyes.

4. Avoid **patterned backgrounds**. Even subtle ones create cognitive load and make text harder to absorb.

5. **White text** on a **black background** is also easier on the eyes than black on white.

6. Make sure your **text color** is **high-contrast** with its background, the higher, the better.

7. Use **colored text**, if at all, sparingly and consistently for **emphasis.** Select colors wisely, watch where your eye goes. Red is an angry, rather negative color, that doesn't stand out well against a black ground. People with red/green color blindness can't see it. Yellow carries a long distance, stands out well against black and is lively but less emotionally charged than red. Cool colors like green and blue tend to "recede" visually and don't carry as far in a large room. Pastel colors in generally show up better than saturated colors on a dark ground.

8. **Keep the amount of text per slide to a minimum.**   3-4 short lines of text on a single slide is plenty.

9. Avoid creating **cognitive load** by having competing foci of attention on a slide. Pictures AND text, or text AND your voice, compete for attention in the same moment.

    If the picture is content-rich and you want people to concentrate on that, don't put a complicated textual component next to it which also requires full attention.   Don't put a whole screen of text up and then talk over it. People cannot read and listen at the same time. Use text mainly to **identify pictures** or **emphasize small, key items of information**.

10. Generally, I avoid putting writing on top of a picture. However for special uses this can be effective. A title slide, for example, can use large type over an effective image if the image provides high contrast to the type and is not too "busy."   Another effective use of overlay is to label the parts of an image, or add larger, more legible labels to a printed map.

11. To make your text stand out better against an image, use the Shapes and formatting tools in PowerPoint to create transparent tinted "screens" to overlay the whole picture or just the part where writing appears. I frequently "fill" textboxes with black and then adjust the transparency of the fill so it is just enough to provide good contrast to the white type. The picture still shows through, but is slightly muted behind the writing.

12. Use a simple **sans-serif typeface** such as Ariel, Trebuchet Calibri or Tahoma. Most of these benefit from being **bolded**. A avoid "fancy" fonts and mixed fonts, except for very special purposes.

13. It is **ESSENTIAL** to choose a **large enough typeface** for the room, erring on the side of too big rather than too small. Too-small type is one of the most commonly-seen design flaws in PowerPoint presentations. What is "too big" on your computer screen is **NOT** big enough for most rooms. 28-point type is a bare minimum, when you are using a wall-sized screen in a small to medium-sized space. When the room is large, or the projection area is small in proportion to the room size (often the case with flat tv-style screens) make the type **LARGER**.

14. Remember the phrase: "**death by bullet point**." Slide after slide of lists can kill a presentation.

15. Tell your story with **pictures.** Use only 1 picture per slide unless you are making a necessary direct **comparison** between two graphs or two pictures.

16. In complex images you can use the Shapes tool (lines, arrows, circles, other outline shapes) to point out or outline the important details. But pointing details out personally with a finger or pointer can actually be better, as a narrative strategy – it is more engaging for your audience to see you moving around, engaging with the image on the screen.

17. Consider the **emotional impact** of the pictures you use — powerful ones cause arousal, have more impact and make your content more memorable. But balance emotion/impact with content-richness — too much of either type in a row becomes boring and numbing.

18. Pictures and graphics should be as **high-quality** and as legible as you can make them. Use the full screen — enlarge as necessary. Make sure they are **sharp** (not pixelated) when enlarged.

19. Do not use **crummy pictures** that you feel impelled to apologize for — either get better ones or leave them out, except when their importance as evidence trumps all other considerations and there is no alternative. If you have to say "I know you can't really see this but…" then don't use that picture.

20. Any image that includes essential content should be clearly visible to the back of the room. Use **enlarged details** if you are discussing specific aspects that might be hard to see.

20. When selecting images for projecting, you can hardly have pictures that are *too* big. 1000 pixels on the long side is a bare minimum for most uses but in my own practice I prefer 2000 or 3000 or even much more when I can get them. In **Google Image searching**, under Tools, you can limit results to "large" images. Whenever possible, enlarge the picture to fill the screen (if it pixelates when enlarged, you need a larger picture).

A very large image (4000 pixels or more on the long side) can provide details at a good level of sharpness.

21. Need sources of images? **Flickr** and the **Google Cultural Institute / Google Art Project** on the Web are great sources of images that provides a wider range of pictures and often better quality than Google Image Search.   Very large sizes are available in most cases.

    The **Google Cultural Institute / Google Art Project** includes large archives of images contributed by arts and cultural organizations.   You will find there, besides art, historical documents and photographs, advertising and commercial photography.   **ArtStor** (available through the Library databases) has a range of art and architecture images frequently used in teaching. **Flickr** is a great resource for all kinds of images because it includes work from a lot of professional photographers as well as scholars and institutional archives. It is a good source for stock pictures of common subjects and for images of art and architecture that are in public museums or places.

    Consult with the Library if you need specific images other than art — there are other databases you can use.

    Many **museums**, **libraries** and **archives,** including the **National Archives,** have also put holdings online in excellent digital images. Some make hi-res images freely available, others, like the British Museum, will send you high-res images for free, for educational use, on request, within a couple of days.

    JSTOR also can be a great source of images for anything illustrated in a scholarly article. From the start, JSTOR had a policy of digitizing the images in their articles at high resolution, so that the pictures are much higher in quality than you would normally expect in a PDF scan. You can search JSTOR by **image caption** to find useful pictures, then download the article, use the zoom tools in Adobe Acrobat to make the display as large as you can, without making the image pixelated, and then click on the image to copy and paste into your PowerPoint, or take a screen shot.

22. Avoid **animated transitions** in PowerPoint except in very limited and very justified circumstances.

23. Some design recommendations tell you that adding **sound** and **video** can "jazz up" your PowerPoint presentations. This practice, however, can easily disrupt your narrative flow. Every time you go out of your presentation to access a website play a video or sound clip is also an opportunity for something to break and cause people to lose focus while you fuss ineptly with the technology.   If you can avoid using the Internet directly in a live presentation, you will be spared problems with downloading speed and connectivity that can really spoil your presentation.

    In situations where sound or video are necessary to convey your primary content, it is essential to **test your presentation** on a system other than your own machine, if possible on the system you will be using in front of the audience.