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- [Resources](#)
- [BizNotes](#)
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[Your PowerPoint Stinks: How to Freshen It Up](#)

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This is a guest post by Karen [Hough](#).

By this time, most people realize that PowerPoint is a scourge — on our ability to communicate effectively, be remotely impressive or keep an audience awake.

If you haven't received that memo, your PowerPoint presentation probably stinks. It's loaded with [data](#) in small type, it goes on forever and you believe words that swoosh onto the screen are a substitute for being an interesting presenter.

Sorry to be so blunt, but over the last decade, I've worked with executives from the C-level down and 99% of those people use [PowerPoint](#) miserably.

The perfect analogy here is the costume wearing the character. Have you ever seen a kid wearing a thoroughly impressive scary costume? Although they remain shy, hiding behind their friends and barely speaking, they have a belief that their costume is making them scary.

Have you ever seen a suit wear a person? Great suit, fabulous accessories, perfect [hair](#) — but the person says little of substance and has less personality to back it up. It's the same with PowerPoint — we believe that IT is the presentation, not us.

PowerPoint is a lot like email — a perfectly good [tool](#), which should save us time and make our lives easier — but has become a monster. What are we doing wrong and how do we fix it?

There's a lot of room to cover in this subject, but let's start with four [basic](#) rules.

1. NEVER read your slides! — If you have to sit through one more person reading their slides out loud, believing that constitutes a presentation, aren't you going to scream? Guess what? Most of your audience has probably completed the 4th grade. We can read! So give us something new — add to the bullet points with engaging stories, tell us the outcome of the [study](#), remind us why this information is important, and who or what it may impact. Your part of the speech should NOT be on the slide. We don't want to see the script, we want to see the performance.

2. Use pictures to illustrate points — one of the best slides I've ever seen was simply a [photo](#) of a pile of sawdust, with more sawdust falling from above to increase the pile. Todd Sattersten, www.toddsattersten.com, was discussing a rather complicated concept of writing, creating content, managing output, and using extra ideas in a way that could be marketed. No bullet points or statistics, yet I have clear recall of the concept, his 5-6 points, and his recommendations. All because his analogy and picture were so striking. Pictures really are worth a thousand words. In a study out of UCLA, it was found that after three days of bullet points on a [PowerPoint slide](#), people only had 10 percent retention while visuals enjoyed 50 percent retention.

3. 10/24 — This ratio means that you should never have more than 10 words per slide, never smaller than 24-point type. Ok, start shouting all of you in data-driven [industries](#). People really get nasty over this ratio, "I have important data to cover! My leadership expects me to show them all the numbers!" Yes, you are right. Your data is very important. But tiny type numbs the brain, and the correct place for data is in a handout. Your slides should be clean, simple, and be a backdrop to YOU. This point is the lead-in to rule #4...

4. You are the [presentation](#), not the PowerPoint — The point of standing up in front of people is to let them know that YOU are the expert. You know your material and you are the one telling the story. If your technology should fail — or as one executive found when trying to enter the Pentagon, "Your laptop is not allowed inside, Sir." — you can still present without the visual cues. Numbers and statistics tell a story. So tell the story showing a simple bell curve rather than cluttering the graph with numbers and tiny type. I repeat, PowerPoint is your backdrop — you are the show.

When considering how to create the greatest impact, first try using [devices](#) such as storytelling, music or pictures. Then, only if you really need it,

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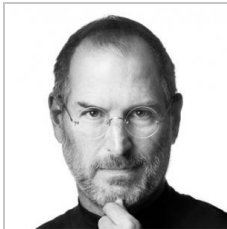
should you consider PowerPoint. There is far more impact in surprise, expertise and good ideas than there is in another predictable presentation. And one more thing – leave the lights up. It's more important the audience see your face than every detail of your slide. Besides, you don't want to give them an invitation to nap.

Karen Hough is the Founder and [CEO](#) of ImprovEdge and the Author of "The Improvisation Edge: Secrets to Building Trust and Radical Collaboration at Work" published by Berrett-Koehler, www.ImprovEdge.com/book. She speaks internationally and writes on negotiation, leadership, sales, and presenting with impact, and is the recipient of the Athena Award for outstanding woman-owned [business](#).

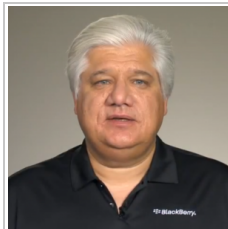
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