



PowerPoint 2003: Potential & Pitfalls

Using PowerPoint effectively in the classroom

Learning guide

Over the last several years, PowerPoint slides have become a staple of classroom instruction. Used well, PowerPoint can help you integrate media into your lectures and make concepts easier for your students to retain. However, when used poorly or inappropriately, your PowerPoint slides may actually hinder learning in the classroom.

In this guide, you'll learn how to take advantage of PowerPoint's potential in the classroom and discover some of the pitfalls experienced by instructors who rely on PowerPoint. Once you've learned more about the strengths and limitations of this instructional tool, you'll be better able to use PowerPoint in situations where it can be most effective.

All techniques in this guide have been drawn from conversations with:

- Instructors who teach using PowerPoint
- Students who have taken courses in which PowerPoint was used extensively

Tapping PowerPoint's potential

Techniques that work well: the instructor's perspective

Make slides available before class either on paper or on your BlackBoard course site. If students have your slides in front of them during your lectures, they'll be able to listen to your lecture without being consumed with the need to copy down every word you're saying to them. This allows them to more effectively think about and respond to the content in your lecture.

- *Use slides to present background and key concepts.* Slides allow you to quickly present conceptual information that introduces a discussion or underscores an argument that you're making.
- *Maintain a close rapport with your students during your lecture.* While you lecture, it's easy to become too focused either on the techniques for running your presentation or on your individual bullet points. In these situations, your slides actually become a barrier between you and your students. Instead, look your students in the eye, make your instruction as interactive as possible, and be ready to navigate between slides in response to student questions.

Techniques that work well: the student perspective

- *Make slides available before each class.* When students can print your slides and bring them to class, they're able to take notes on valuable ideas and complex concepts without frantically copying the text of every slide you present. Students argue that this approach empowers the motivated learner far more than it may discourage the unmotivated learner from attending class.
- *Good slide composition makes all the difference.* Clear, succinct, and specific bullet points that focus on key concepts make it easier for students to remember information from your lecture.
- *Use animation to allow students to take notes more easily.* Animating slide content at the right pace can help focus students' attention and contribute to the flow of the class. A good rule of thumb is to animate one bullet point at a time. Some students even suggest that you animate the text within each bullet point at a rate similar to the one you'd use when writing the same content on the classroom's whiteboard.
- *Use slides to present images in combination with related descriptive text.* Slides can be a very effective way to present images along with important related information. Students report that this technique can be very useful for image-intensive disciplines such as art history, archeology, and architecture.
- *Use slides to present complex assignments.* Summarizing the details of a complex assignment on a slide can help your students understand the goals and parameters of the project or paper more quickly. In addition, they'll be able to refer to the assignment description at any time by viewing the slide from your BlackBoard course site.

Avoiding PowerPoint's pitfalls

Areas for improvement: the instructor's perspective

- *Avoid placing too much detail on each slide.* Often, instructors will include too much information on each slide, making it difficult to read and confusing to follow. Instead, focus each slide around a few key concepts. Use your lecture to fill in the gaps or convey additional detail. Also, consider capturing this extra content in the speaker notes that go with the slide so that students can review it by downloading your PowerPoint document from your BlackBoard site.
- *Slides with extensive data sets can be very confusing.* While slides can provide a very effective way to summarize data sets, presenting more than a few data points can make your slides difficult to read and understand. When presenting data on a slide, focus on important data. Use either the speaker notes area, a related paper handout, or a related document on your BlackBoard site to provide students with the rest of the data.
- *Avoid depending exclusively on your slides.* While PowerPoint can be an effective way to combine visual content with your spoken lecture, classes which feature a never-ending parade of slides may not be as successful as classes which use several different instructional tools. Consider utilizing discussion, case studies, and handouts to complement your slides and lecture.

Areas for improvement: the student's perspective

- *Poor slide composition can distract students from your content.* When you try too hard to limit the text on your slide, it can often result in cryptic bullet points which are hard for students to decipher either during class or when they downloaded the slides from your BlackBoard site. On the other hand, when slides are too content-rich, students may be unable to listen closely to your lecture while digesting or copying the text on each slide. In both cases, your slides end up competing for attention with your lecture instead of complementing it. To solve this problem, try to strike the right balance by focusing each slide on 3-4 key ideas and phrasing each bullet point so that it can be understood by a student reading your slides without hearing your lecture at the same time.

- *Avoid the temptation to use PowerPoint to pack too much content into your course.* Students report that instructors who use PowerPoint often plan to present more content than they would if they were forced to write key concepts on a whiteboard. This temptation tends to manifest itself in two ways:
 - As each class progresses, instructors lecture at an increasingly rapid pace in order to present all of their slides. Students become increasingly unable to capture enough of the important content in their notes.
 - At the end of each class, in an effort to at least reference all of their planned content, instructors will flip through their final slides at an even more accelerated pace and with minimal explanation. Even worse, they may skip final slides altogether and encourage students to download the slides from the BlackBoard course site.

To fight off this temptation, think carefully about what content must be included in your lecture and what can be presented via readings or your BlackBoard course site. After each class session, make a few notes to yourself about pacing and content. Use these notes to adjust and fine-tune future lectures.

- *Know your animations, and plan in advance when to trigger each one during your lecture.* Instructors who incorporate animation on each slide may often trigger an effect either too early or too late for the animated content to make sense in the flow of the lecture. This makes your content unnecessarily confusing for your students. Instead, practice delivering your lecture while triggering your animations. If you have only limited time to rehearse your lecture, consider cutting down on the number of animation effects on your slides.