

Murray Z. Frank



Professor of Finance
University of Minnesota
Carlson School of Management
Department of Finance
Email: murra280@umn.edu

[Working Papers](#)

[Selected Published Papers](#)

[Vita](#)

Presentation Advice about Excel, PowerPoint and Word

What follows is my attempt to pull together some sensible suggestions for students. I have learned this from many other people over many years. None of this advice is original to me.

Before you touch the computer, think.

What are you hoping to accomplish with your presentation? Who is the audience? What do they already know? What do they want? What do you want your audience to take away from your talk? A talk is not ordered randomly. What logical structure are you going to use for the presentation? All of this deserves thought up front.

What you show on a PowerPoint slide depends on what you are trying to accomplish. A common mistake among my students is to simply dump an entire spreadsheet onto the slide showing too much material in too small a font.

Decide what your point is. Then show what is needed to support that point. If you have several points, you probably want to have several slides.

When you show too many irrelevant numbers, you risk losing your audience, or getting asked questions that disrupt your flow. Or even worse, the audience may ask you about something that you put on the screen, but you did not notice and you are not sure about what it means. This is embarrassing and I have seen it happen many times.

If you really want to show a spreadsheet, make sure the fonts are big enough to be legible. This means that only a small part of a spreadsheet can be on screen at any moment.

The Usual PowerPoint Advice

The goal is to have your audience thinking about what you are saying, and not about your cool stylistic tricks. This advice is a good start for most of us most of the time, particularly in academic and business settings. There are times when it makes sense to intentionally do something else.

1. Keep each slide simple. Try to use no more than perhaps six lines on a slide and not too many words in a line. You want the audience focusing on what you are saying rather than focusing on reading.
2. Font size for the body is usually recommended to be from 24 to 30, but if necessary it can go as low as 20 or as big as 32. Titles are usually larger. Font size also depends on the room size and the screen size. Bigger fonts are needed for older audiences.
3. Do not use too many different fonts. Usually one or two is enough in a presentation.

4. For presentations, experts tend to recommend “sans serif” fonts such as Calibri. If you want to avoid the default, reasonable alternatives include **Arial**, **Corbel**, **Gill Sans**, or **Segoe UI**.
5. Use the same fonts on all slides in the presentation so there is a consistent feel to your presentation.
6. Minimize slide junk. If something provides no information, why do you want it on your slide?
7. If you are not very careful, clip art can look cheesy.
8. Avoid distracting special effects and animation.
9. If you are using multiple colors, what information is the color providing to the audience?
10. Make sure the text has sharp contrast against the background so that it is readable. It is often said that having pure black fonts with a pure white background is a bit hard on the eyes. Using something that is very light but not quite white, may be a bit easier. This is probably true, but in a business setting I would be a bit careful about using a non-white background color.
11. Underlining rarely looks right (except for hyperlinks).
12. When you can, use simple diagrams, flow-charts, and graphs. These tend to be easier to absorb than large tables with many numbers. Too many text-only slides in a row can become tedious.

If you want to dig deeper, good places to look:

<http://www.presentationzen.com/> or

<http://projects.iq.harvard.edu/undergradscholars/book/export/html/6510>

When might you want to deviate from the above advice? Two groups come to mind. I am sure you can think of other cases.

First, if your audience is into design and/or being artistic, then I would avoid seeming too boring and business-like. Avoid using Arial, and pick some font that they have not seen before.

Second, when my kids were in Middle School they loved decorating PowerPoints all the distracting special effects. Some of the teachers actively fostered the use of distracting effects and hard to read fonts in the name of being “creative” and “nonlinear”.

Know your audience.

Further Presentation Advice

Our PhD students need to distinguish two kinds of presentations. For teaching use PowerPoint, and follow the rules given just above. For academic presentations it is standard to use Latex with the Beamer package, not PowerPoint.

To get Beamer: <http://www.ctan.org/tex-archive/macros/latex/contrib/beamer>. A good place to see how to use it well is <http://web.stanford.edu/~rehall/BeamerSkeleton.tex>. Latex with Beamer is so standard that using anything else risks being noticed. You want them thinking about your ideas, not your presentation software.

It is also possible to force PowerPoint to look like it was done in Latex. To do this use the following Computer Modern fonts: `cmr10` and `cms10` for the serif and sans serif. These may already be on your system. Then you should adjust the PowerPoint bullet to look like a Latex bullet. This will get you most of the way. Then you will need to deal with the headers and footers.

If those fonts are not already on your system, the more up to date versions of the Computer Modern fonts are called Latin Modern. They can be obtained here: <http://www.gust.org.pl/projects/e-foundry/latin-modern>. To use these you must download and install the fonts you want.

I have experimented with this a bit and it seems to work. But I have never used such slides in an actual talk. I am one of those unfortunate people who slightly prefers some of the recent Microsoft fonts to the Latex fonts. (Not cool! I know. I know. But, what can I do?) For me the main advantage of Latex/Beamer is in using bits and pieces of my academic papers directly. Those papers are virtually always done in Latex. So my academic talks are normally in Latex/Beamer, and my teaching is in PowerPoint.

Word

For written documents it is common to use a "serif" font. If you use Latex, I suggest just accepting the default font. Nobody will think about your choices. They will focus on what you have to say.

If you are writing documents in Word, many fonts are in use. Times New Roman is probably the most common. Georgia is perhaps the safest choice if you are not sure what to pick. It is fairly similar to Times New Roman but seems a bit easier to read. Apparently the Supreme Court likes Century Schoolbook. It is easy to read but it takes up a lot of space. It is not common in what I read. In publications you will also frequently see: Book Antiqua, Garamond, and Palatino Linotype. Probably, any of these are fine for most purposes.

Once you have picked your font for the document, stick with it. You want your reader thinking about your content, not your stylistic tricks.

**The views and opinions expressed in this page are strictly those of the page author.
The contents of this page have not been reviewed or approved by the University of Minnesota.**