

Introduction

Would a Microsoft Office PowerPoint presentation without bullet points still be a PowerPoint presentation?

That's a hard question to answer these days, because wherever people gather for presentations, you're sure to see the same predictable format on the screen of the meeting room, slide after slide. The conventional bullet points approach in presentations has such a strong grip on our collective consciousness that it produces remarkably consistent results across organizations, professions, and even cultures.

If you're like most people who use PowerPoint, creating a presentation starting with a series of bullet points is probably second nature. Bullet points are easy to write, and they make creating slides a breeze. When you show them on screen during a presentation, they quickly remind you of what you want to say and provide a record that you've shown the audience the information you intended. Like PowerPoint presentations themselves, bullet points are so much a part of our everyday lives, it's hard to imagine how things could be any different.

But although bullet points make it easy for us to create slides, they don't always make it easy for audiences to understand what we want to say. Growing numbers of people are expressing a sense of frustration with the conventional bullet points approach, and they're expressing themselves in a wide range of forums including discussion groups, surveys, books, essays, articles and blog postings. What they're saying, basically, is that slides filled with bullet points create obstacles between presenters and audiences. You might want to be natural and relaxed when you present, but people say that bullet points make the atmosphere formal and stiff. You might aim to be clear and concise, but people often walk away from these presentations feeling confused and unclear. And you might intend to display the best of your critical thinking on a screen, but people say that bullet points "dumb down" the important discourse that needs to happen for our society to function well.

Somewhere in our collective presentation experience, we're not connecting the dots between presenters and audiences by using the conventional bullet points approach. This issue is of rising concern not only to individuals and audiences—even the major players of large organizations are taking notice of the problem. It seems that in every location where people meet, from small meeting rooms to board rooms to conference halls, people want a change.

As a presenter, what are your options? Isn't the bullet points approach all that's possible with PowerPoint? In fact, there's something you *can* do. You can tell a story instead. If what people are saying about bullet points is true, we can interpret their complaints as a symptom of something that's gone missing. It's almost as if the pendulum has swung too far in the direction of bulleted lists, charts, and graphs to the point where we've lost the balance that we need to make us feel connected to one another. In this fast-paced culture of change and complexity in which we live, people understandably yearn for a return to the basics of human connection, inspiration, and common purpose. That's exactly what a story can offer.

The concept of a story has been emerging as a hot topic in organizations, but why would a story be more of an appropriate model for presentations? In most presentation contexts, we don't gather simply to tell anecdotes to entertain one another—although a personal story can be a powerful technique to support a point. Rather, presentations should help us to discuss and decide on the issues that shape our lives and our organizations. Presentations are different from personal anecdotes because they deal with complex issues and usually involve the reasoning and logic that's essential to informed decision-making.

We can strike a balance between the benefits of storytelling and the need for reasoning by applying a specific type of story *structure* to the complex requirements of a presentation. We can reach back into history to rediscover the classical foundation of both storytelling and persuasion then apply those concepts to PowerPoint presentations today to dramatic effect. A persuasive story structure is strong enough to hold whatever your presentations demand, including the rigor of your critical thinking and the sophisticated media techniques audiences expect. Applying this type of story structure to your PowerPoint presentations is the heart of the three-step approach described in this book, which introduces a completely new alternative to the conventional bullet points approach.

The Beyond Bullet Points approach to PowerPoint presentations has roots in many sources, including classical philosophy, contemporary media techniques, and recent research related to the way people learn from multimedia. It draws from these inspirations and more, and interprets them all through the lens of a process you can use to produce a presentation. This book doesn't dwell on the theory behind the ideas, but instead embeds the ideas into every step of the process.

Chapter 1 introduces a fictional scenario in which you're faced with the challenge of transforming a presentation using the conventional bullet points approach into a new presentation without bullet points. Chapters 2 and 3 guide you through the step 1 of the Beyond Bullet Points approach: *writing a script to focus your ideas*. Chapters 4 through 6 walk you through step 2: *storyboarding your script to clarify your ideas*. And Chapter 7 introduces step 3: *producing your script to engage your audience*.

Beginning with Chapter 2, each chapter ends with 10 advanced tips that you can use to enhance the key ideas in each of the chapter. (When you first read the book, you can skim through these tips, and then return to them later when you're ready to put them into practice.) This book is designed to be a practical guide that you keep close at hand while you work on PowerPoint presentations, as well as a source of ongoing inspiration.

The heart of this book is that it's really about people communicating with people. By using a commonly available software tool to help you to do that, you can find focus, clarity, and engagement. I hope you'll find that and much more in this book, as you make and tell your own presentation stories *beyond bullet points*.

About the Author

CLIFF ATKINSON is a leading authority on how to improve communications across organizations using Microsoft PowerPoint. He is a popular keynote speaker, a writer, and an independent management consultant whose clients include companies ranking in the top five of the Fortune 500. He is president of Sociable Media in Los Angeles.

As a captain in the U.S. Air Force, Cliff earned the title of best commentary writer in the Department of Defense; after his service, he held marketing and consulting positions for a couple of start-up companies in San Francisco during the dot-com boom. He holds a B.A. in English and journalism from Baylor University in Texas and an M.B.A. in international business from Richmond–The American International University in London.

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