THE NON-DESIGNER'S PRESENTATION BOOK

SECOND EDITION

principles for effective
presentation design
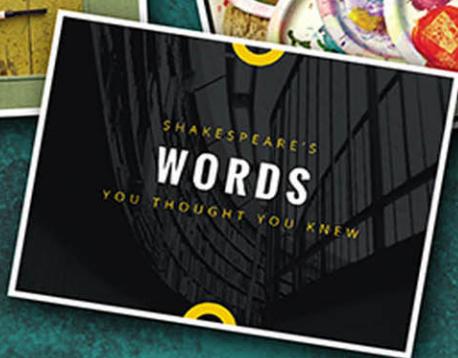
TRISMEGISTUS
METIC CORPUS

Let's make
a journal

with Carmen Sheldon

handmade revolution
in digital design

SHAKESPEARE'S
WORDS
YOU THOUGHT YOU KNEW

ROBIN WILLIAMS

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SECOND EDITION

principles
for
effective
presentation
design

Robin Williams

The Non-Designer's Presentation Book • second edition
ROBIN WILLIAMS

This book is dedicated to
every single person who
has bought a copy of
The Non-Designer's Design Book,
especially those of you who
have written to tell me
how much it meant to you.
Thank you so much!
I wrote this one for you.
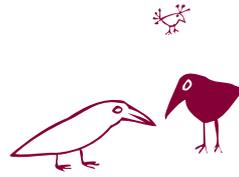
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Introduction

I've given hundreds of presentations in the past thirty years, watched hundreds of others, and learned a thing or two about effective presentations.

I don't always use PowerPoint or Keynote. I've given presentations using the computer itself as my vehicle, or directly in the app I'm teaching. I've given plenty of talks without using a computer at all (sometimes because the technology failed). Today most people use PowerPoint or Keynote, so this book focuses on digital presentations using the popular presentation programs.

There are three things you must know and accept if you want to create a decent digital presentation:

It takes time to create a good presentation. There's no way around this. Well, you *can* create a functional and perhaps passable digital presentation in a short amount of time, but to create a good or great one, *you need to invest the time* in developing a good structure, investing in great images, making it consistent and clear. It takes much longer than you might have thought.

You must learn your software. You really cannot create a good presentation *unless you know how to use the software.* Read the manual. Read the Help files. Take a class. PowerPoint likes to do things for you, it likes to take over your formatting, so if you want control over your slides yourself (which of course you do), you must learn how to circumvent the automatic features and take charge.

Everyone expects more from you these days. You can't get away with bad design and schlocky presentations anymore—*everyone is much more visually literate and we all expect **more.*** We want lively content and visually stimulating slides and an invigorating personal presentation. You've got to rise to the occasion.

I have to assume if you're reading this book that you are interested in learning how to design visually interesting and professional-looking slides. So let's go!

Robin

chapter four
Relevance

Everything you put on your slide should be **relevant** to the topic of that slide *and* to your audience. This includes not only the text, but the graphics and backgrounds.

Remember, the point in your presentation is to communicate something clearly. The more irrelevant items you have on your slides, the more it takes attention away from you and the more difficult it is for your audience to mentally sift through the pieces and combine them into a coherent whole, all while trying to listen to you.

And keep in mind that what is relevant to one audience might not be to another. Does the older, conservative audience really want the loud and obnoxious video bits that are in the presentation?

Part of the clarity and relevance of the information develops from your commitment to do your homework—you cannot create one presentation to show to six different audiences. You might, however, create one master presentation with everything you want to say about this topic, and then make six copies of that master to **customize each one for an individual market.** Your thoughtfulness and care will show, and it will impress your audience.

Get rid of superfluous stuff

You don't need all kinds of gewgaws sitting on your slide cluttering up your information. Don't stick random rubbish in the corners—the corners really don't mind being empty! The more stuff you stick on the screen that has nothing to do with your presentation, the more you disrupt the focus. If the focus is visually disrupted, it translates into your audience losing focus.

A shovel? I have to dig my own foundation? There's buried treasure? You're a grave-digger? Don't you find your mind trying to make a connection between the shovel and the information?
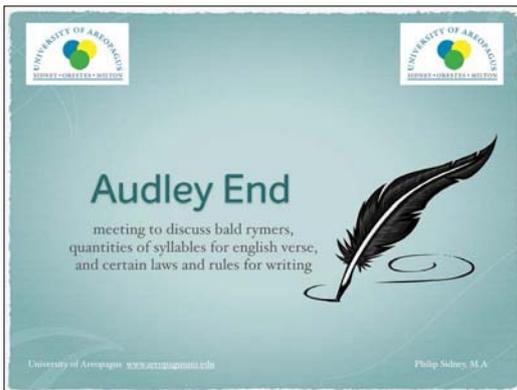
Even if the clip art is related in some way, the more you make my eyes wander around the screen trying to figure out what's going on, the more you lose me. Can you feel your eyes trying to make sure you've scanned everything on this screen? Can you feel them wandering around?

That includes the logo on every page

I realize there is a strong belief in making sure that every darn slide in the entire deck has at least one company logo on it, or perhaps two logos, or a logo and a tag line, or a logo and a company name and a tag line. Yes, you've got people trapped in a room for an hour and they have no choice but to look at the screen, so why not brand your brand into their brains?

Is the point to make sure they don't forget who you are? Hmm, wouldn't the audience be more inclined to remember you if 1) your presentation is clear and relevant, and 2) the handouts are terrific and useful and nice-looking so they will be kept and not trashed? It is on your useful handout that your corporate logo belongs, not on the ephemeral slides. After a few slides that logo becomes simply clutter and the brains of attendees blank out its meaning.

One logo on every slide. No, two logos on every slide. Combine that with the unnecessary background picture, the blue edges taking up space, and the horizontal line. If we take out everything that's irrelevant, perhaps we can make the type big enough to read.
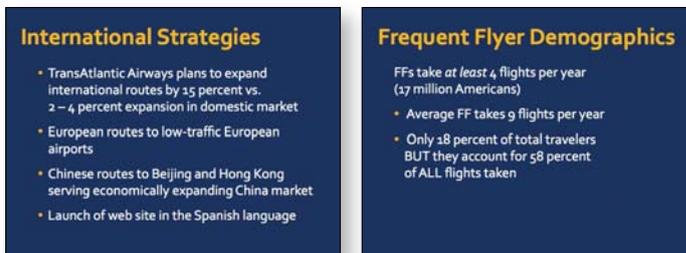
There's still too much text (if it's a live presentation) and the statistics could use more interesting treatment, perhaps with images of actual humans, but at least we've gotten rid of the irrelevant pieces and can start to work from here. After you read Chapter 8 on Repetition and Chapter 9 on Alignment, come back to this page and notice how those principles were applied.

Your brand is bigger than your logo—it includes your colors, your typography, your inimitable style, your critical information, your useful handout, your confidence, the professionalism of the presentation. It's not just the logo.

Backgrounds

A great deal of the visual impression of your presentation comes from the background you choose, so choose it carefully. If you can't find a template that suits your material, there are lots of graphic tools in PowerPoint and Keynote to create your own background. You can also invest a few dollars in images from a vendor such as CreativeMarket.com or iStockphoto.com.

There are two important things to remember:

> Choose a background that *complements* your talk, one that is *relevant* to it, not a background that *contradicts* or *confuses* it.

> *Work with the background*—don't just randomly pile stuff on it.

Below-left you see the actual opening slide as the presenter created it; on the right, she added a nice background image that she bought for $3 at iStockphoto.com, and we used an interesting and relevant font (Apocrypha) instead of the default Arial. You can see what a dramatic difference it makes, and you can imagine the difference in the audience's immediate perception.
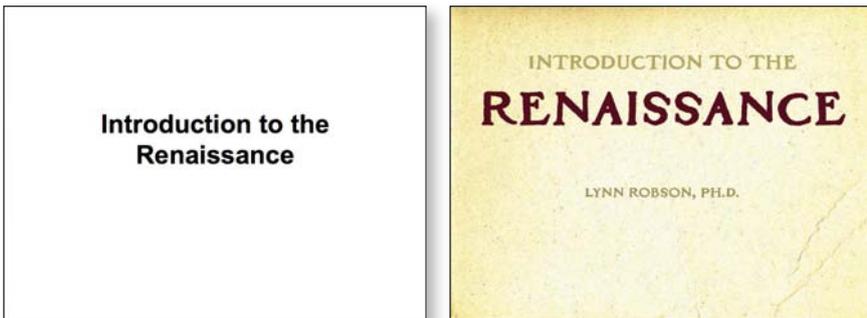
You will learn in the next section that all I did with the type in the way of design was to add contrast—a contrast of the size of font and a contrast of color.

And don't be afraid to put your name on the introductory slide—your audience *wants* to know who you are.

Hmm, a presentation about purchasing a home on a background of the open ocean. My brain, all through the speaker's talk, will be constantly trying to process the connection between the ocean and a suburban house.

Here's a guideline to remember: **If it looks hard to read, it is.** This example is hard to read even on your computer, so please consider how much more difficult it will be on a screen in a large room. Besides making the text difficult to read, this irrelevant background does nothing to clarify the topic.

I realize that it's often hard for new designers to allow empty space on the slide, but you must learn to let it be there. Random shapes or images can actually make it more difficult to place and organize text effectively.

Part of the ubiquitous problem of inappropriate backgrounds and their use is that many free PowerPoint templates disobey this very guideline, leading many to think it's perfectly okay to put a lot of wimpy text on a busy background. Take this free template, for example:
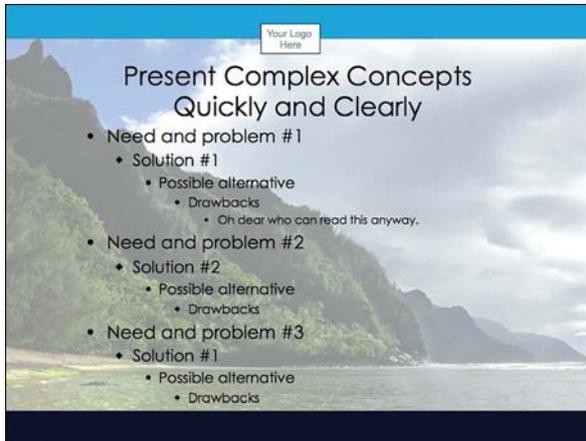
The text is directly on top of the distracting (and irrelevant) background; you assume that since a "designer" created it this way, it must be okay. Never assume that. This slide (and most templates) gives you five levels of bullet points, as if anyone in the entire room could ever read past the second one. Heck, **you** can't even read past the second one. Use your own common sense.

But templates *are* getting better. If you have an old version of PowerPoint, it would behoove you to upgrade so you can get the new templates that are included with the application, and then download some new ones from either the Microsoft site or from the many sites that provide PowerPoint templates. Choose the templates with a consciousness about the purpose of your presentation; choose a background that supports your message.

See Chapter 15 for some sources for good templates.

The more complex the information, the simpler the background

Occasionally there is no way around the necessity of putting a lot of data on one slide. Just keep in mind that the more text, charts, graphs, or images that you *must* put on the slide, the simpler your background *must* be.

It's not necessary to have exactly the same background on every slide in your deck (see Chapter 8 for more on that topic), so if you've got a graphic theme you really like that ties your slides together, you can get away with eliminating parts that are not necessary when you have a lot of data on one slide.
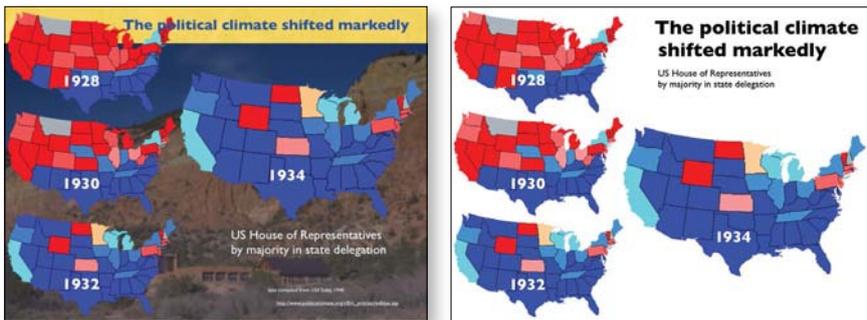
It's not hard to find the irrelevant and unnecessary items on this slide (left). Make a habit of really *seeing* the individual elements so you can make decisions about what can go and what should stay.

When is a busy background okay?

A busy, complex background can be perfectly great if the data on that slide is large enough and bold enough to be understood—and if that background is relevant. When you see a busy background that works (it doesn't confuse the message, you can read the text, etc.), ask yourself why that is? Put it into words; the more often you put into words what works and what doesn't work, the easier it is for you to automatically create better slides.

Don't use dorky clip art

You cannot use dorky clip art—especially dorky animation clip art—even if it comes with your app; if is *does* come with your app, your app is probably old because the clip art has been getting phased out, fortunately. There are a number of terrific places to get free or inexpensive professional-level illustrations and photographs (see the Resources page in the last chapter), or let your information stand on its own.

Don't believe someone who tells you that you *must* have a graphic on every slide. That's baloney. Having silly or random art on every slide only lowers the quality of your presentation.

The text on your page is the most important element. Images can be terrific and can add hugely to the emotional impact, but if their point is to add to the emotional impact, why use goofy pictures? Do they add to the clarity? Are they relevant? Probably not. Probably just the opposite. So be careful of the images you put on the page—make sure they *enhance* and *support* your text.

I'm really quite astounded by how many slideshows still use random and silly clip art on their slides, especially their already overcrowded slides.

Fortunately, dorky clip art is getting more difficult to find and the current trend is to use full–screen photos, which can create another problem because too often the photos do not relate to the text or they are misplaced (as above), misused, or misleading. Be conscious.
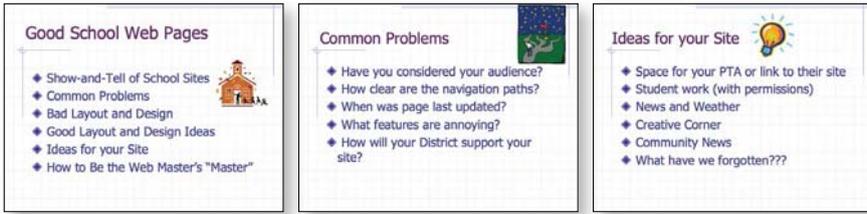
The arbitrary clip art on these slides is not relevant and it does not clarify the information. It adds visual interest, but not the positive kind.
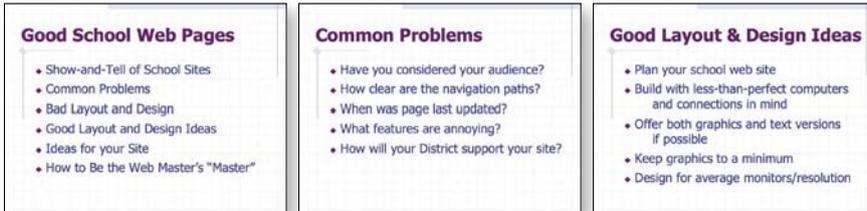
Really, it's **okay** to eliminate the clip art! These slides have enough visual interest without distracting little pictures. Without the clip art, you can make the headlines bolder and bigger; you can also make the bullets smaller. Emphasize what is important, tone back what is not. (I would personally get rid of that little doodad under the headlines.)

Remember, everything in and around the presentation reflects on you and impacts the perception of the value of what you are presenting. If a picture is worth a thousand words, think of how extra brilliant you have to be to make up for one goofy clip art image.

See Chapter 15 for some resources where you can find high-quality photos or illustrations—and ideas.

Use *relevant* photos

There is a trend in presentation design to use one full-screen graphic per slide. And the graphic has to be "high impact." I have seen a number of slideshows where the presenter followed that rule, but the high-impact photos on the slides had nothing to do with the topic!

A problem with irrelevant images is that our minds are very visual so we are very attracted to the gorgeous or provocative photo. But our minds are also very practical, so they immediately start trying to place the photo into the context of the presentation topic. If there is no relevance, if the photo is completely random but gorgeous, our brains have to do a lot of processing to figure that out. Meanwhile you're talking away and I've missed half of what you said, gaping in awe at your high-impact photo with the right side of my brain and trying to use the left-side of my brain to process what you're talking about at the same time.

If you choose to use high-impact photos as your design theme, you need to use them throughout the slideshow. The point is not to use one or two terrific photos and then put a dozen bullet points on the slides in-between—you need to commit to the design concept throughout the deck, or not. One option is to use a high-impact (and relevant) photo to introduce each topic. You introduce the topic with this mind-grabbing image to get the audience in the mood, then carry on with your beautifully designed text-based slides. Or use a slice of that photo as a repetitive element on the succeeding slides. Whatever you choose, make it relevant.

A problem with using high-impact photos is that it can be difficult and time-consuming to get the perfect photo for each slide (assuming you're not using random, irrelevant images). Even if you can get the images inexpensively at one of the resources mentioned in Chapter 15, it's still time consuming.

Video and animated clips

This, of course, also applies to video clips in your presentation (see Chapter 5 regarding animation and transitions built within PowerPoint or Keynote). Don't be misled into thinking I want to watch some indiscriminate YouTube video as filler or mere entertainment—I'm using valuable time to come to your presentation to get specific information. Use video, by all means! But please make it worth my time. Be able to put into words why that particular video clip is relevant to your presentation. If you can, then use it!

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