

# POWERPOINT DOESN'T SUCK, YOU DO

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The counter-intuitive approach  
to compelling presentations.

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David McGimpsey

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*A poor craftsman blames his tools.*



# INTRODUCTION

**M**y first ever presentation was a train wreck. Let me tell you what happened. Years ago, I worked for an extremely dysfunctional organization. The atmosphere in my department was toxic. People were burned-out and unhappy with the working conditions of the office, interpersonal politics were insane, and projects were stalled. Nothing was getting done fast. It was a “professional” war zone. As hard as they might have tried, the management couldn’t get things moving in the right direction.

I was relatively new and had no ax to grind with any members of the department. Although it wasn’t comfortable, I could go about my day without getting involved in any politics or getting into screaming matches. Being quite new, and not being a member of any particular group, I could observe what was going on objectively. I could see what was happening around me and I could clearly identify the root cause of some of the problems. I took notes and kept my head down.

Things were so bad that, over a few weeks, my notes had substantial information that could be put to good use. As I reviewed them, I could see recurring themes and problems,

which could be resolved with a few tweaks here and there. The closer I looked at my notes, the clearer the solution became. I sat down, and I drafted out a plan. A plan to improve the work environment. A plan which would neutralize the bad apples, make the office a better place to work, increase efficiency, and make our department more profitable. If I could fix these problems, even a little, it would surely be good for my career, so I worked hard on my plan.

It took about two weeks of observation and late nights, but I had my plan! I was exhausted, but it was ready. Just a tweak here and a tiny adjustment there, and the cogs would be spinning smoothly in the department again. The plan was good to go, but I had a problem. If I wanted to get my plan implemented, I would need to present the details to the management to get their buy-in. Without them on my side, my plan was going nowhere.

So, I recommitted myself to the long hours, and I hit PowerPoint hard. I doubled down on the long nights, putting together my charts and bullet points, aligning my images and text. I practiced my lines in front of the mirror, while walking the dog, and on the train. After another week of late nights, skipped meals, and pots of coffee, I had a gleaming slide deck, a practiced speech, and a whole lot of butterflies in my stomach. I was nervous but ready. I had a solid plan, and that's all that mattered.

The day came. The management team filed into meeting room 6 and waited. I was about to take the stage, but the nerves got the better of me. Something was holding me back. I looked out into the audience and saw managers whispering to each and shifting uncomfortably on the hard chairs. I only had one chance to get this right. I closed my eyes, took a deep breath, and walked out onto the small platform. I stood in front of them shaking. Slides behind me, laser pointer in one hand, cue cards in the other. I froze! What was I meant to



say? I'd practiced and practiced and practiced, but no words would come. My legs started to shake, and I could feel the blood rush to my face.

More uncomfortable shifting from the managers. I stared at them. They stared back at me. Waiting for this to be over. One manager kindly asked me if I needed some water, another very deliberately checked his watch as if to say, "You're wasting my time, buddy." My mind was racing. Madly trying to reach back and remember some of my practice. Oh, why couldn't I remember? It seemed the more I tried to remember, the further away the memories became.

I glanced down at the cards in my hand. Seeing the keywords made things even more confusing, more blockades of my memories. One gentleman stood up as if to leave. I had to do something! This idea was going to save my department! Then I remembered... My slides! This was my only chance. I flicked on the slides, turned around, and began reading the bullet points from slide 1 to the managers.

By the second slide, the tension in the room had started to lift, and I was getting into the swing of things. Some memories were coming back, which made speaking about my bullet points a little easier. The process of reading a bullet point and elaborating went on for some time.

It was around slide number 6 that I realized that the room was dead silent. I took my eyes off my slides and checked the audience behind me. No one was paying attention! They were checking their messages, writing, one manager was even reading a magazine. I spun back around and read through the remainder of the slides and bullet points as quickly as I could.

Five minutes later I handed over the stage to the audience for questions. Nothing. Silence. No questions. "Come on!" I thought. "Ask me some questions. This is an amazing plan.

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A fantastic idea that will make this a better workplace for everyone, increase efficiency, and make us more money.”

Blank stares mixed with silence. My eyes pleaded with the audience for what felt like minutes.

Finally, at the back of the room, someone raised their hand. My heart lifted, and I extended my hand in his direction. “Yes sir, you have a question?”

“Can we go now please?”

And there you have it. My first presentation. A nightmare.

Since then I do things differently. I have discovered what works, and what definitely does not work, when delivering a presentation.

In the following pages, I will share my secrets with you.

Are you ready? Okay! Onward and upward!

David McGimpsey  
Osaka, Japan

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I have good news and bad news. Both involve your slide deck.

Let’s start with the bad.

Those PowerPoint slides? The ones that you’re working so hard on? Yeah, they’re not going to help your presentation.

Worse still, that PowerPoint template. The one that you paid good money for. It won’t make a speck of difference to the reception, or retention, of your message.

Want proof?

Imagine a slide deck from a Steve Jobs presentation delivered by Barry from accounting.

The bad news is, we see PowerPoint as both the problem and solution. And it is neither. PowerPoint (or Keynote or Prezi) is just a tool. A tool which can be used well or used badly. Sadly, in most cases, it is used badly to support a bad presentation delivery. And this brings me to the good news.

You can deliver an awesome presentation! It's simpler than you imagine and, even if all your presentations to date have been shockers, you can do it. It's most likely easier than how you're going about your presentations now. And you can do it with or without the support of PowerPoint.

You see, a good presentation has nothing to do with PowerPoint and everything to do with you. Get the "you" right, and the slides become almost irrelevant. Get the "you" right, and you can deliver a confident, engaging presentation.

This book is all about how you can get the "you" right. The simple ways to improve your delivery to engage your audience, get them to buy-in to your ideas, and get them to take action.

Important note: Before we go any further it is important that I point out that I have no issues with PowerPoint. Any reference to PowerPoint you find throughout this text could be easily replaced with Keynote or Prezi. I reference PowerPoint in this text because it is the product which has become synonymous with the slide deck.



# PART ONE



## THE SLAP

Jerry wiped the sweat from his top lip. He was only half-listening to his colleagues. As Greg and Max chatted about office politics, Jerry focused on very different matters.

Today had been a rip-roaring success. Jerry, Greg, and Max had finally closed the high dollar deal they'd been working on for the last six months. The ink on the client contract was still drying while the trio began their celebrations.

Greg nudged Jerry, "Want another beer?"

Jerry nodded absentmindedly. Greg headed to the bar for refills. Max hit the bathroom.

Alone, Jerry was able to focus. He took the crumpled cue cards from his jacket pocket and shuffled through them.

Each cue card contained three items. Among the items on the cards were opening lines and talking points. Jerry had prepared the dog-eared mess a couple of weeks earlier. The only exercise they'd seen so far was a laundry spin cycle.

Jerry was a success in business but unsuccessful in love. He could close deals, implement projects, manage people, keep work conflict under control. He could even convince hordes

of staff to accept an unpopular change initiative. But he couldn't get himself a girlfriend.

Even the thought of approaching a woman made Jerry tongue-tied. Unable to think of what to say. His approachees would watch Jerry with sympathy as he mumbled sounds and foamed at the mouth. Sympathy quickly changed to irritation as his prospects worked out that he wasn't actually a simpleton but that this was a pickup attempt. Tonight was going to be different, he thought. Tonight, he would be confident. He just needed to find a nice girl to approach.

The bar was filling up now. Greg was still waiting to be served. Max was still in line for the bathroom.

Jerry scanned the dark room, occasionally fanning rogue tobacco smoke away from his face. And he finally saw her. Sitting at a small table in the corner. All by herself. In the darkness. Sipping a cocktail and checking her phone. She was very cute and appeared to be alone.

Jerry was suddenly filled with panic. This was her! This was his chance! His moment!

He had to act now! He had been here before, and lost out due to inaction. Time spent getting siked up in similar situations before had resulted in missed opportunities; Jerry usurped by more eager approachers.

He stood and reached for his cue cards. Ripping them from his jacket pocket, he knocked his glass over. The glass hit the ground with a thud but mercifully didn't break. Presumably, the sticky carpet provided a soft landing. A spatter of beer dripped from Jerry's crotch.

He looked up, red-faced. Had anyone noticed? It appeared not. The ambient noise of the bar had swallowed this accident. Jerry grabbed some napkins and gingerly patted his crotch dry.



She was talking on her phone now. Perhaps organizing to meet someone later. He needed to act fast. Get over this fear and just act! Jerry consulted his cue cards one last time. He repeated the lines to himself, closed his eyes, and stepped forward. There was no going back.

Greg returned with beer to find their seats abandoned and Jerry's glass and chair overturned.

Jerry moved slowly and purposefully towards the alcove. His legs felt like dead weights, but he pushed forward. He was almost there now, committed. It was now more embarrassing to turn back than to continue. He pinched his cue cards tightly, pressed against his arm, and protruding from the left cuff of his shirt.

He was within reach of her table now. She sensed his presence and looked up, then quickly looked back down at her phone.

Jerry's mouth was dry. He was sure no words would come out.

He was there. He stood motionless for a second. After what seemed like minutes she looked up. *Come on cue cards*, he thought.

"What's up?" she asked.

Jerry's mind was racing. He needed to say something! She was already starting to recoil at this long silence.

He stuttered like the ignition of old car. And then the words finally came. *Yay, cue cards!*

"I would like to date you." She recoiled further. Jerry noticed and sped things along.

"There are 3 things I want to talk to you about. First, I'd like to discuss our hobbies and interests. Second, we should talk about dating history, and... erm..." Jerry let the cue cards slip

a little from his sleeve and glanced quickly, “oh... finally, we should discuss where to go on our first date.”

Jerry paused and waited for a response. Nothing. She just sat, mouth open, phone still in her hand.

He continued, “So, if you don’t have any questions at this stage, why don’t we talk about your hobbies?”

As Jerry reached for the chair next to her, she stood up quickly and shoved him away from the chair. “What are you doing, creep?”

Jerry was caught off balance. In an effort to protect his precious cue cards from being discovered, he wobbled and slipped forward. Now he was falling towards his “target”. She let out a scream and slapped Jerry across the face.

Jerry continued his forward trajectory and landed on the floor.

Greg and Max arrived just in time to see the object of Jerry’s affections storming away.

.....●.....

So, here’s what just happened. Jerry got very unlucky. He tried to do what he thought was right and failed miserably. His deep-seated fear of rejection caused him to plan in such way that failure was inevitable.

He wanted desperately to get a date, and he set about preparing to get one.

His preparation was all wrong. He prepared to reach his goal as quickly as possible, i.e., *How can I get a date in as few steps as possible?* The pattern he followed was probably something like this:

1. I want to get a date as quickly and painlessly as possible
2. I fear the possibility of rejection and negative judgment
3. I will probably forget what to say or run out of things to say, so...
4. I will write talking points on cue cards in order to have an easy reference when I am out and about
5. I will practice reading the talking points, confident that if I forget something, I can check the cue cards anytime

First, Jerry is never going to get a date. Second, he is making this way too difficult for himself. He is setting up an interaction where he needs to do all the work, which the other party won't be interested in anyway.

Jerry is so focused on his goal that he is not considering anything about the relationship. In Jerry's mind, the relationship is secondary to fulfilling his goal: *Get the date and worry about the relationship part later*. The trouble for Jerry is that no one is going to listen to him, let alone agree to go out on a date with him.

Let's consider what would have happened if Jerry had taken a different approach. No cue cards. No rehearsing of talking points. Instead, Jerry starts with a simple "Hello". He asks some questions, actually listens to the answers, and starts to build a rapport between himself and the lady. In turn, she might ask Jerry some questions. Very soon they have introduced themselves and the rapport continues to build.

Jerry still might not get a date, but he has a much better chance.

So, what's the point of all this, and how does it relate to presentations? All in all, Jerry just did what we all do in our presentations every day!

If we change the scenery a little bit and replay the events around Jerry's proposition, what we can see is the same pattern we use every day at work or at school.

1. I want to get through my presentation as quickly and painlessly as possible
2. I fear the possibility of rejection and negative judgment
3. I will probably forget what to say or run out of things to say, so...
4. I will start with PowerPoint (or Keynote or Prezi) and type out my headings and bullet points in order to have an easy reference when I am delivering my presentation
5. I will practice reading the bullet points, confident that if I forget something I can refer to the slides anytime

This is how most of us prepare presentations. And we all know what it's like to be in the audience with a presenter who has prepared this way. This is the very reason we pay so little attention to presentations. This is why we walk out of presentations with very little new knowledge. This is why we dread going to the next presentation.

But if we started our preparation with PowerPoint, isn't that the problem?

You can certainly blame PowerPoint, or whatever slide software you used, for a bad presentation. Blaming the software escapes the real issue. The real issue is you. The real

issue is your inability to connect with your audience and build a rapport with them; to frame your topic in a way where the audience understands why it is important and pays attention because they want to, not because they have to.

To succeed in work, business, and life, communication is key. Develop your communication skills in a way that captures your listeners' attention, engages them, and leads them to action. If you can do that, bullet points are irrelevant. This book is a self-contained guide about how to stop blaming PowerPoint and how to develop your presentation skills to push you ahead in your business, your career, and your life.

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