

# Speaking PowerPoint

The new language of business

Create clear and convincing strategic plans,  
executive briefings, research reports  
and other boardroom-style slides



**BRUCE R. GABRIELLE**

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Printed in the United States of America

Insights Publishing  
[www.insightspublishing.com](http://www.insightspublishing.com)

ISBN: 978 0984 236046

Library of Congress Control Number: 2010911951

Bulk orders of this book for corporations, educational institutions or for premium giveaways are available by contacting Insights Publishing at [www.insightspublishing.com](http://www.insightspublishing.com)

Cover design: Thomas Gorree

Interior layout: 1106 Design

Interior images: Thomas Gorree, Bruce Gabrielle, Brent Dykes, [www.VectorPortal.com](http://www.VectorPortal.com)

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*For my daughters Haley and Selena.*

*Always remember, girls, to follow your dreams. Dreams are like the stars in the sky. You may not actually touch them. But follow them anyway and they will lead you to beautiful lands you never could have dreamed of.*

*And for my wife Neena.*

*The night sky is full of stars, and it's my joy in life that we always seem to be looking at the same ones together.*



## Acknowledgements

THIS BOOK HAS BEEN A JOURNEY, much of it spent alone in front of a computer screen studying research reports, writing and rewriting chapters, and experimenting with PowerPoint techniques. But the journey has been enriched by the people who joined me, even for short strolls, along the way.

Thank you to Professor David K. Farkas, Professor in the Department of Technical Communication at the University of Washington, for kindly reviewing several chapters. Dr. Farkas is one of the most thoughtful scholarly writers on PowerPoint as a new communication medium and it was refreshing to discover his writing and to see many of my own thoughts reflected there. His precise and expert feedback was invaluable in helping to shape some of the foundation thinking for this book, and especially his pointer to the STOP format was particularly influential to the book's final shape.

Thank you also to Nancy Duarte, author of *Slide:ology*, for her feedback and positive encouragement. Despite her busy schedule launching her second book *Resonate*, Nancy reviewed several of the chapters on design principles and her insights significantly altered and shaped my thinking in chapter 13.

Thank you to several PowerPoint-loving colleagues and authors, who provided me helpful advice when I was struggling with some thorny decisions, including Professor Michael Alley, Dave Paradi and Magdalena Maslowska for pointing me to useful resources.

Thank you to the many attendees at my workshops and business school lectures who provided positive feedback that let me know the principles worked, as well as constructive criticism so that I could revisit some of my thinking or find more compelling ways to explain it.

Thank you also to several friends and colleagues for reviewing early drafts of the book and providing useful feedback on the front cover, including Zubair Murtaza, Zimran Ahmed, Gaddy Radom, Tonya Fuhs Wallace, Stanley Keller, Rowland Savage, Stephen Schultz, Marcelo Prieto, Steven Silverman, Gerardo Dada, Tracey Pavlishin, Aaron Abraham, Brian Dominguez, Sarah Dziuk and Maria Potenza. A special thank you to my wife, Neena, for her courage to suggest making some final changes just before the book went to press, and for being a patient listener for two years. I'm sure talking about PowerPoint was a less than thrilling topic for you.

And thank you, dear reader, for selecting this book out of the thousands of other things you could be reading or doing right now. It's my sincere wish that all our hard work pays off for you.



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## CHAPTER I

# The New Language of 21st Century Business

**I**N 2000, A HIGH SCHOOL QUARTERBACK named Andrew applied to Arizona State University for a football scholarship. ASU students on the scholarship committee were divided into three groups and each was given the hopeful Andrew's high school football statistics.

The first group rated Andrew's application 4.5 out of 7; the second group rated it 5 and the third group rated it 6. All of the groups were made up of similar students, and each student evaluated the exact same statistics. But something was different about the application the third group saw and rated so highly.



What was it about the application that made group three more likely to approve it? And is it something you can use the next time you propose a new business idea? Or when you're coaching your team on how to convince another department to support your project? Or when you're selling a consulting engagement to a new client?

All three groups saw the same statistics, but each group saw them in a different format. The first group saw the data as a table in a text document. The second group saw it as a chart in a text document. The third group saw the data as an animated chart in a PowerPoint slide.



This study was conducted by three ASU researchers, including Professor Robert Cialdini, author of the book *Influence*. After seeing the results, he repeated the study with three groups of sports fans used to reading a player's statistics and found the same results. What he learned so impressed him, he resolved to use PowerPoint more in his own consulting work.

You hold in your hands a book that will change the way you think about driving business decisions in the 21st century. Using the old rules is like selling ideas to groups 1 and 2. But when you learn how to use the new tools effectively, it will be like selling ideas to group 3.

Fast forward six years. In 2006, I was a senior marketing manager at Microsoft leading a global brand advertising campaign for Windows Mobile smartphones. If I had known of this study, and other studies you'll read about in this book, I would have sold my ideas differently.

At the time, our ad campaign was focused on business professionals who needed to check email on their phones when they were travelling. I uncovered a segment of email users we were not focused on, a group much larger than the mobile professionals, and told my manager about this surprising market.

At the meeting, I showed her my findings in a table, just like the one seen by group 1 of the ASU study. And like that group's lukewarm reaction, my manager did not agree with my recommendation to divert some of our multi-million dollar campaign to this new segment. She couldn't see this audience as potential email users.

Later that summer, a young MBA intern independently discovered the same audience. He also recommended directing some of our massive advertising budget, but rather than show his idea as a table, he made a colorful and slick-looking bubble chart in PowerPoint, illustrating with the size of the bubbles this untapped audience was larger than the mobile professional audience. Soon, Microsoft meeting rooms were buzzing with this discovery. The elegant bubble chart helped people see things his way.

A few months later, RIM released the Blackberry Pearl, a stylish email device aimed at young, trendy hipsters. RIM had seen the same audience we had seen, but they were able to move faster.

### Winning in the idea marketplace

Businesses are idea marketplaces where business managers compete for attention, budget and headcount by selling their ideas. Successful business managers, those rewarded with promotions, teams and bigger budgets, are the people who know how to sell their ideas effectively.

PowerPoint is no longer just a visual aid for presenters. In fact, more and more companies are shifting to PowerPoint and away from text for day-to-day business documents. PowerPoint has become one of the business leader's most important tools for winning in the idea marketplace.

How important? Increasingly, strategic discussions begin as PowerPoint decks, are circulated among stakeholders for input and come to represent the consensus view. Since major strategic decisions usually involve a presentation to executives, it makes sense for these strategies to begin life as PowerPoint decks.

In March 2010, Sarah Kaplan of the University of Toronto released a paper entitled *PowerPoint and Strategy*. She observed how one technology company used PowerPoint to drive strategy and concluded that PowerPoint had become not only the document that chronicles business decisions, but the *battleground* where new ideas advance, warring ideas duel, and champions prevail. Those who knew how to use PowerPoint effectively wielded an advantage over their peers.

PowerPoint has three central roles for driving strategic decisions, says Kaplan:

1. PowerPoint facilitates collaboration. The slides externalize assumptions, often through diagrams, where they can be debated and discussed leading to consensus. PowerPoint is modular, so one department can insert a few slides and so contribute to an ongoing discussion.
2. PowerPoint makes ideas “real”. Ideas rattling around in someone's mind, or even composed in a text document, have not gone through the collaborative process of discussion and debate. More than that, as the ASU study shows, PowerPoint just makes ideas seem more credible. PowerPoint formalizes and legitimizes ideas.
3. If you control the deck, you control strategy. Important strategic recommendations always culminate in a presentation to senior management and represent the stakeholders' consensus

view. If your slide is not included in the final presentation, it is not considered by management and does not influence strategy.

In her report, Kaplan told of one manager, newly promoted to team leader, who rushed to prepare a PowerPoint deck for an important meeting. But the meeting stalled and a decision could not be reached because of his ad-hoc PowerPoint style. That manager lamented later that his lack of PowerPoint skills damaged his reputation as a leader.

PowerPoint, used well, can be your secret weapon to winning in the idea marketplace. First of all, as I'll demonstrate throughout this book, visual communication is a superior way to drive strategic decisions. Whether convincing others with a standup presentation, or standalone reading, visual communication is more effective than text.

Second, visuals lead to more productive decision making meetings because they externalize assumptions where they can be evaluated, debated and modified. And visuals help to depersonalize conflict because attention becomes focused on a shared visual rather than directed at other speakers.

Researchers at the University of Lugano, Switzerland found that visuals lead to more productive meetings. Conflict in those meetings is more likely to be amicable, focused on strategic issues and based on finding a common ground. In contrast, when visuals were not used assumptions remained hidden and conflicts were more likely to be resolved through argument and personality clashes. PowerPoint, used well, focuses discussions outward and leads to more productive meetings.

Third, visuals help executives understand complex problems and make better decisions. There is more data available than ever before, and more tools available on business managers' computers for analyzing that data. Displaying that data is done most effectively through charts and diagrams. Executives live in a world of complexity and information overload, and time is a scarce resource. Clearly showing complex information to executives makes best use of that scarce resource.

The shift to PowerPoint from text documents makes sense, given the complex environments of many businesses. And, in theory, it should lead to the best ideas winning in the idea marketplace.

But in practice, PowerPoint is not used effectively often enough. Too often it seems that good ideas are passed over while obviously flawed ideas find sponsors, only because this flawed idea is easier to understand, more persuasive and rolls off the tongue more easily.

Business leaders who want the best ideas to survive in the idea marketplace want their people to know how to use PowerPoint effectively. Executives who sponsor weak strategies will be at a disadvantage when they face tougher competitors powered by strong strategies. Executives who want the best ideas to be recognized and supported will want their managers to know how to compete in the idea marketplace. Those who develop the 21st century skills to use these new tools effectively will have an advantage in the idea marketplace as well as the broader global marketplace.

This all points to an important conclusion: PowerPoint is not just software for presentations, but the new language of business and a critical business skill. Said Clarke L. Caywood, associate professor of integrated marketing at Northwestern University in a January 2003 Chicago Tribune

article, “No one in business today could pretend to be facile in business communications without PowerPoint. It’s like being able to read.”

This is a book about competing in the idea marketplace by explaining ideas clearly, persuasively and simply enough that they can spread. In the 20th century, we’ve used a certain set of tools, the same tools used to sell ideas to groups 1 and 2 of the ASU experiment. But the new 21st century tools, the tools used to convince group 3, can increase your odds of spreading ideas and winning in the idea marketplace.

Business communication has changed forever. In the 20th century, typical business communication happened through text documents, fax machines, phone calls and standup presentations with a few expensive visual aids. That era is fading away along with eight-track cassettes, drive-in movie theaters and Cabbage Patch Dolls.

Increasingly, effective business communication is visual. Those who master visual communication will be more effective driving business strategy in the idea marketplace. This is not a fad, but a fundamental shift that businesses and business schools are learning they need to embrace.

### **The secret to selling ideas in the boardroom**

While the technology has changed, one thing hasn’t changed: the way people think. In the end, all success depends on changing human behavior: buy my product, invest in my business, approve my proposal. Winning in the idea marketplace means understanding how the human brain works; what makes ideas more understandable, more persuasive and more memorable.



To start, let’s take a look at an elementary classroom where two groups of third grade students are reading the same storybook. When they have finished reading, they take a test to see how many facts they can remember and what they think will happen next in the story. Group 1 does well remembering facts and guessing what will happen next. But group 2 remembers twice as many facts and is twice as good predicting what happens next.

What makes group 2 understand the story so much better than group 1? Is it a technique you could use to help make your ideas more clear?

Or let's look over the shoulders of university students at the University of Minnesota, listening to a speaker trying to encourage them to attend a workshop on time management. One group of students leaves the room *less* likely to attend the workshop than when they came into the room. Another group leaves the room *more* likely to attend the workshop. What did the second group see that the first group didn't?

Or let's go back to 1984, when students at a major U.S. Midwestern university were asked to view Yellow Page advertisements for several common industries: plumbing, automotive repair, construction and so on. They were then asked to recall all the companies that fit into each category. They were not told in advance they would need to remember. One group remembered nearly twice as many companies as the other group.

Two times better recall? What technique can make twice as many people remember your idea?

The difference in all of the studies mentioned above was the use of visual imagery. Among the elementary students, group 2 was asked to visualize what was happening in the story while group 1 was just asked to remember it. Among the University of Minnesota students, they became more interested in the workshop when the speaker's presentation included visuals. And it was the Yellow Page ads with words and pictures together, rather than words alone, that students found twice as easy to remember.

This is called the *picture-superiority effect* and has been well-known for at least 40 years. Advertisers know pictures make you more likely to notice, read and recall their advertisements. Instructional designers also know students learn better when pictures are part of the class materials.

Why do pictures make ideas easier to understand, easier to agree with and easier to remember later? The answer, according to some, is that most people, if not all people, think in pictures. Think of anything—the White House, Mariah Carey, the San Diego Chargers—and an image pops into your head.

For instance, neuroscientists using brain scanners report that when we read a novel we are actively converting sentences into pictures. You may be familiar with this phenomenon, reading a story of a pair of convicts being chased by dogs through the woods at night you can probably conjure up images of their panicked expressions and the thick branches tearing at their orange jumpsuits while they race away from the rising sounds of yelping hounds in the distance. You can see all this in your head.

A 1989 U.S. study had fifth grade students read poems aloud. Researchers stopped them along the way to ask if they had an image in their minds, and 60% of the time the students did.

Why does an image pop into your head? Can you understand and reason without the picture in your head?

Aristotle, one of the great thinkers of all time, said images were necessary for thought. He wrote in *On The Soul*, “To the thinking soul images serve as if they were contents of perception...that is why the soul never thinks without an image.”

Rudolf Anheim expounded on this theme in the book *Visual Thinking*, saying without pictures there is nothing for the mind to work with. He said further that seeing and thinking are the same function. “There is no basic difference...between what happens when a person looks at the world directly and when he sits with his eyes closed and thinks.”

This is a remarkable statement! Our brain uses the same process to *see* the world as it uses to *think about* it? What does the brain science have to say about this?

Scientists were amazed to find that the area of the brain responsible for processing visual information—the visual cortex—is also active when we are thinking. This means that there is more than one way to project an image in our mind: pictures can come from outside through our eyes, but pictures can also come from inside the brain, using our imagination. Our brain does use the visual system to think.

Think about the metaphors you use to describe understanding. Do you *see* what I mean? *Look* at it this way? I don’t think we see *eye to eye* on this. I can’t quite *picture* it. What’s your *view*? What’s your *perspective*? What’s your *outlook*? What’s your *vision*? Isn’t it amazing to realize we use words that describe seeing when we mean thinking and understanding?

Brain science is difficult because one cannot see what is happening in the brain. Thinking is an invisible process, so it’s difficult to prove this theory conclusively.

But here is an experiment I use in my workshops to test the theory. Make a list of five things you want for your birthday. But if the thing you are writing down pops into your mind as an image, you must strike it from your list. You can only write down things that you cannot see in your mind. Go ahead, give it a try. Put down this book, get a pen and write out five things you want for your birthday.

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_
4. \_\_\_\_\_
5. \_\_\_\_\_

Were you able to write out five things? How often did you have to cross items off your list because they popped into your head as images?

When I run this workshop exercise, people sit stock still in their seats, battling the impulse to imagine. They end up writing and striking out items constantly.

When they are done, I ask if they were able to complete the exercise. Many cannot; they aren't able to suppress images from coming to mind. Others are able to list five things. But when I ask, "Is this a good list? Is this what you really, really want?" they concede it's not a great list; it was a Herculean mental effort just to suppress the images.

Professor Richard Mayer, author of *Multi-Media Learning*, has conducted dozens of empirical studies showing university student remember more and understand better when they learn from words and images rather than words alone. Mayer postulates that words are processed in one part of the brain, images in another, and they are integrated together at the end to create meaning. When one or the other is missing, the brain has difficulty with the integration step and some of the meaning is not retained.

But this theory is controversial because some people report they do not see images in their head. Instead, they see words. Or they report seeing nothing at all.

Data on the number of picture thinkers versus word thinkers is slim. Research in the Netherlands by Linda Kreger Silverman finds 30% of the Dutch population thinks primarily in pictures, 25% thinks primarily in words and 45% thinks in both. Only a minority of the word-thinkers think exclusively in words, suggesting a vast majority think in pictures at least some of the time. Albert Einstein, for one, insisted he only thought in pictures and not in words.

If it's true that most of your audience thinks in pictures, you can encourage them to *see things your way* if you give them the picture.

### **A lack of skills and training**

At this point you may be convinced you would be more effective at winning in the idea marketplace if you could use visuals. But PowerPoint? There are so few examples of good PowerPoint and many arguments against it: *I've seen what people can do with PowerPoint. And most of it is awful.*

And you may be correct that most PowerPoint is awful. But does it have to be? Couldn't it be better with better visual communication skills?

Despite its important role in strategy-making, most business managers do not know how to communicate clearly through PowerPoint. They struggle to create coherent slides, often turning to ornamentation to dress up otherwise unimpressive slides. If PowerPoint is so important in business, then where is the training?

It is not offered in business schools. Corporations offer training on the mechanics of PowerPoint but not on how to communicate complex information effectively. There are books on how to use PowerPoint for stand-up presentations but not for collaborating with colleagues to shape strategy and for boardroom presentations to drive complex business decisions.

There is no doubt we need better PowerPoint skills for driving smarter strategic decisions. PowerPoint's critics have been plentiful and vocal.

One of PowerPoint's most-quoted critics is Edward Tufte, a Yale professor and author of several pioneering books on information display. Tufte's *The Cognitive Style of PowerPoint* knocked the

software because it “reduces the analytic quality of serious presentations.” He continued the criticism in a Wired Magazine article entitled “PowerPoint is Evil” where he compared PowerPoint to a drug that is supposed to make you beautiful but instead makes you stupid.

Like Tufte, military leaders also argue that serious decisions are made with crudely constructed slides consisting of clip art and sound effects that over-simplify complex issues.

In July 2009 a senior officer in Israel’s defense ministry, Brigadier General Erez Weiner, blasted the use of PowerPoint, saying “I believe the use of presentations has made the level of discussion, and the depth of study, more superficial.” And in the U.S., Retired Marine Colonel T.X. Hammes continued the attack, saying PowerPoint “is actively hostile to thoughtful decision making” because of its over-reliance on half-formed bullet point thoughts. Former U.S. Marine Sgt. David Goldich didn’t pull any punches when he said, “PowerPoint has largely become affirmative action for the inarticulate.”

Educators also debate PowerPoint’s merits. José A. Bowen, a dean at Southern Methodist University, attracted national attention in 2009 when he advised his faculty to *teach naked*. What he meant was *without PowerPoint*, saying professors are using it “as a crutch rather than using it as a creative tool.”

In business, PowerPoint is derided through editorial cartoons in business magazines, mocking YouTube videos, online satires showing the Gettysburg address as a PowerPoint deck, and by self-proclaimed presentation experts. It’s hard to find the PowerPoint supporters.

Most of the criticism is aimed at the *thoughtless* use of PowerPoint, and especially following the defaults that encourage bullet points and artless use of color and clip art. The criticism tends to fall into four categories:

1. Unclear messages, especially an over-reliance on half-formed thoughts delivered as bullet points, or unclear slide organization without a central message.
2. Incoherent slides jammed with information that overwhelms the reader.
3. Amateurish slides that elevate form over content, often caused by over-enthusiastic use of clip art, colors, effects and animations that buries the message in ornamentation.
4. Inappropriate use of slides during presentations, such as reading bulleted lists to the audience.

The most common defense is that the user, not the software, is to blame. *The poor carpenter always blames his tools.*

If people are using PowerPoint wrong, then what’s the right way? Where are the classes? Where are the textbooks? Where are the answers to the critics’ arguments?

They are in this book. Let’s discuss all four concerns, and the skills that answer those concerns.

## The Mindworks Presentation Method

This book attempts to close the skill gap, using language and examples to which business managers can relate. It is based on how the mind works to process complex information, and especially visual information.

I call this method the Mindworks Presentation Method. It is intended for business leaders who want to present their ideas clearly and persuasively, while creating visually pleasing slides in less time. My focus is PowerPoint because it's the standard for expressing business ideas, but the concepts are equally applicable if you are expressing ideas visually in a Word document, on a website or in email.

The principles of the Mindworks Presentation Method are not based on rule-of-thumb advice, but on 40 years of research in fields as diverse as neuroscience, cognitive science, instructional design, information design, graphic design and the legal profession. I use these principles in my own work as a market researcher who regularly presents strategic presentations to executives.

The principles are comprehensive and address all of the critics' concerns.

### *Criticism #1: Unclear message*

The first criticism is lack of clarity. Section One of this book focuses on the brain science of crafting a message that is simple, clear and persuasive. For instance, did you know you can double the chance your message is understood by putting your conclusions before your supporting data?

### *Criticism #2: Incoherent slides*

The second criticism is incoherent slides. In Section Two we discuss the brain science of learning and persuasion. For instance, you can make readers 15% more likely to understand your slide if you use a complete sentence as the title. How many slides do you see every day that could be clearer with that one simple change?

### *Criticism #3: Amateurish slides*

The third criticism is overly-noisy slides where the message is buried in ornamentation. In Section Three we cover some easy-to-use rules of graphic design that will make your slides look more eye-catching and professional. For instance, using color makes the reader spend three times as much time on your slide as pure black and white, but too much color will make readers more likely to disagree with you. What's the right balance?

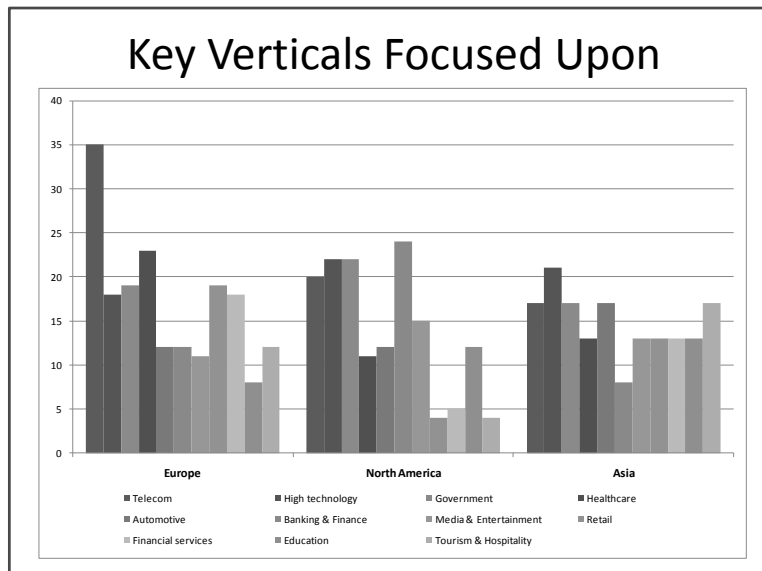
*Criticism #4: Misuse of slides for presentations*

The fourth criticism is presenters using PowerPoint as a crutch instead of an enhancement. Boardroom presentations are rarely one-way, but involve discussion and debate. Well-crafted PowerPoint slides facilitate that discussion. We devote one chapter to discuss what brain science has to say about the role of slides for presentations. For instance, did you know when you read the text on your slides your audience will learn less than if they read the slides themselves?

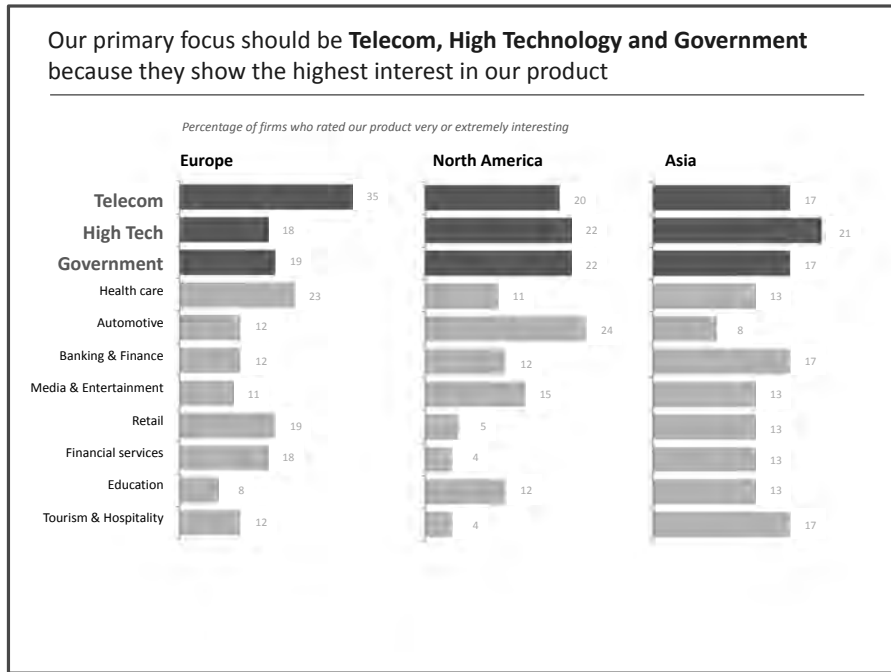
It's surprising how often you will catch yourself and others using PowerPoint in a way that collides with how the brain processes visual information. But it's also exciting to realize how much more effective communicators we can be once we know what we're doing incorrectly. We answer all of the critics' complaints in this book.

Even simple slides that are already easy to understand can be improved. For instance, here is a slide with a simple message. This is not a terrible slide. In fact, it is simple and uncluttered.

But what is the message? Go ahead and look the slide over. Does it take you three seconds to understand? Ten seconds? Thirty seconds?



You can communicate the same information more effectively and even make your slide more professional looking. It is the same content, but organized to save time and get to the message faster. This slide uses the principles of the Mindworks Method.



Do you see how much more quickly the reader can understand the slide's message? How much cleaner the slide looks? How much easier it is for an executive to *see what you mean*?

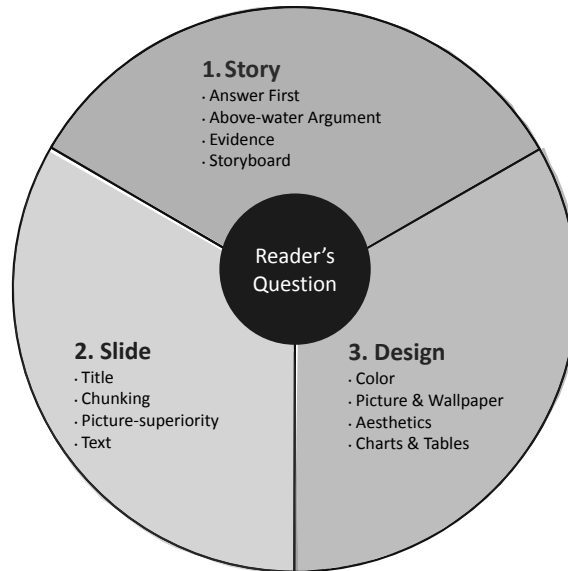
There are four main ways the Mindworks Method will make you a more effective communicator:

1. You will know how to create more clear and understandable presentations
2. You will know how to create more persuasive presentations
3. You will know how to create more visually pleasing and professional-looking presentations
4. You will create presentations two to three times faster

Ultimately, you will learn a skill for selling strategic ideas in the boardroom; a skill that most other business managers still lack.

The rest of this book is broken into three sections, covering the three critical elements of the Mindworks Method.

## The Mindworks Presentation Method



### Section One: Story

Before you can develop a PowerPoint deck, you must decide what information the reader needs, in what order your slides will be shown and what evidence you will use to support your argument. This should be done before you even open the program. Using a storyboard to plan your document in advance can cut in half the time you spend creating slides.

In particular, we cover some of the brain science of organizing information so your message is clear and the supporting evidence is convincing. We also discuss the brain science of persuading through logic and emotion.

### Section Two: Slide

After you have developed a storyboard, you will see that each slide has a single message that supports your overall argument. We talk about the role of slide titles, how to place text and visuals on the slide so they are easily understood, and how to explain complex ideas over multiple slides.

In this section, we cover some of the emerging research around effective slide design, as well as the brain science around working memory, our brain's whiteboard for understanding information. We also introduce a library of visuals that business managers can use on their slides to facilitate effective decision making meetings.

*Section Three: Design*

While creating your slide, you need to decide what you want to highlight. If everything is important, then nothing is important, and the reader has to spend extra time trying to prioritize the information on your slide. You can make it easy for the reader to see things your way by directing their attention.

We cover the brain science behind attention, and especially the impact of color and decorative elements. We especially spend time on charts, one of the most common visuals used in business. We'll learn why the default settings in programs like Microsoft Office Excel may actually hurt your ability to compete in the idea marketplace, and suggest a process for taking control of your business graphs.

The Mindworks Method does not depend on artistic skills. I'm writing this book assuming you will never be a good graphic designer and don't aspire to be one. I have a lot of admiration for those who can whip up gorgeous slides with lovely color and perfect placement. But that's not me. I assume most people in business, and most people reading this book, are like me—smart but not very artistic. This book was written for you.

**Summary**

1. PowerPoint is a critical business skill. PowerPoint has moved beyond being just presentation software and is now a critical tool for driving strategy in large companies. Businesses are idea marketplaces and selling ideas requires knowing how to communicate effectively with PowerPoint.
2. PowerPoint uses the power of visual thinking to make ideas clearer and more persuasive. This has been proven over the past 40 years and is called the picture-superiority effect. But business managers have not been trained how to communicate visually.
3. PowerPoint has not made it into the training curriculum of business schools or most corporate training rooms. What training exists is for simple slides that will be presented to a large audience, not for displaying complex data in a boardroom. The critics note four problems with our skills today: unclear message, incoherent slides, amateurish design and using slides poorly during presentations.
4. The Mindworks Method attempts to close the skill gap for business managers and address the critics' concerns. Based on cognitive science, it describes the most proven and effective strategies for communicating clearly and persuasively in business. There are three stages: craft a clear story, create coherent slides and use graphic design to organize information and improve aesthetics.