# Too Much Text!

**M**y friend and colleague, Dave Paradi, conducts a biennial poll on the aspects of PowerPoint that annoy people. Most people talk with abstraction about their objections with the software; Dave actually finds out and quantifies it (thinkoutsidetheslide.com/survey2011.htm). And since 2005, the issue of text on a slide—too much text, to be specific—has never *not* been ranked in the top three of PowerPoint annoyances.

So this topic strikes me as the ideal place to begin the discussion on slide design. And because I'm not actually a graphic designer by trade, I will not attempt to create jaw-droppingly beautiful slides that might inspire and intimidate you.

Instead, my goal for everything we do in this chapter and the ones that follow is to make you think *hey, I can do that.*

# Why Do We Create So Much Text?

We identify four legitimate reasons why well-intentioned content creators feel compelled to overload their slides with text. Some are easy to resolve, others not so easy—and in all cases, the text creates one of the most insidious barriers to a presenter being able to connect with his or her audience.

Here, for your reading enjoyment, are The Four Reasons Why Excessive Text Can Ruin Your Day.

### 1. You do not know any better

We spoke about this way back in Chapter 1 when we sketched one of the typical profiles of the PowerPoint user: the person who comes to the software from other Office apps and has no idea that a quick copy-and-paste from Word could lead to Death by PowerPoint.

If this is you, you're easy. You have not yet formed a multitude of bad habits. You simply followed your instincts and thought that the stuff you wrote in Word would work as well in PowerPoint. You simply need to learn about the foundation of what makes for good presentation content, and with few preconceived notions already in place, that training would likely go quickly and without trauma.

You are the easiest to address. You create slides like the one in Figure 16.1 (repeated from Chapter 2) because that is the only way you have known how to tell a story or deliver a message. You don't have bad habits; you have no habits, and that is a much better thing.

**Figure 16.1**
A person with no experience whatsoever with presentation design is liable to overcreate his or her slides.



Treat ME as a Valued Employee – Not a Cost

"Last year, our Plan paid $8 million in medical claims to protect our employees from major health care expenses. It also cost $500,000 to administer the Plan. These expenses were paid with money the Company and enrolled employees contributed to our self-funded Plan. Of this, the Company paid $6.8 million and employees paid $1.7 million. The Company's contribution averages $7,289 for each employee."

**Figure 16.2**
Can one slide sum
up everything that
is wrong with
presentation
visuals? Maybe so...



### 2. You are addicted

Your situation is more complicated than the person who simply doesn't
know any better. You might very well know better, but you cannot help
yourself. You do not feel comfortable unless everything you want to say is
displayed before you. You don't believe you can function...you become par-
alyzed...you feel naked. Without your safety net of a fully-composed script
being projected before you, you lose your composure and your poise.

Figure 16.2 will look familiar to those who read Chapter 13. It is the quint-
essential poster child for the too-much-text syndrome. My conversations
with the client who created this slide were, all at once, educational, amus-
ing, exasperating, and telling:

**Me:** Why do you want all of that text on the screen?

**Him:** I just feel more
comfortable with it.

**Me:** What if we kept all
of the high-level ideas but
removed the detail?



**Him:** That would not be
acceptable.

**Me:** How about if we compromised and created two levels of text?

..................................................

**Him:** No, I want all of it to be shown. I concentrate better with it there and I'm more comfortable, knowing that even if I forget something, they'll be able to read it.



Although I didn't have the heart, it was my obligation as his hired consultant to find a way to tell him that his audience will never be able to read all of it, and worse, they cannot give him the attention he deserves with a backdrop of all that drek. He listened, nodded, and then said, "Well, that's my style and I'm not going to change it."

It might as well have been crack cocaine we're talking about here—he could not function without it. He was addicted. And I had no opportunity to conduct an intervention—he let me go a few weeks later.

Are you like my former client? Do we need to send you through detox? And what does detox look like with respect to text addiction? I actually have some experience in this matter...lucky me...

1. The first time you, the addict, try to deliver one of your standard presentations without your usual verbose slides, you feel awkward and lost. You don't know what to look at, you have difficulty keeping your train of thought, and you get thrown off by the fact that your audience is (perhaps for the first time) looking at you.

2. The second time is a bit better, as you realize that you must compose your thoughts from what you know, not from what you can read on the screen. It is still scary for you but there are moments when you connect with audience members in a way that you never had before. You actually made eye contact! You want to feel that way again.

3. By your third attempt, you own it. You are more comfortable sharing ideas that come from your heart and your experience and you not only enjoy the better contact with the audience, you begin to crave it. It's like a high.

You realize what I'm suggesting here—you have traded one addiction for another. The feeling of true audience engagement is so intoxicating, it is

not long before you feel as if you cannot live without it. You're still addicted, but to something healthier. This is a good trade.

### 3. You want your slides to double as handouts

You are not going to like me for this discussion, because while trying to improve the quality of your work, I'm going to hurt the quality of your worklife. I'm both mindful of and sympathetic to the demands that are placed on presentation designers and creators in today's workforce. Your deadlines are often ridiculous. Nonetheless, I must tell you this:

> **In 17 years as a presentation consultant, I have not once seen a slide deck that successfully functions as both compelling visual content and informative written material. Not once.**

There is just no getting around it: if you create slides for your presentation that follow the ideas laid forth in this book—or the ones authored by Garr Reynolds, Nancy Duarte, Cliff Atkinson, or countless others—those slides will necessarily fail as printouts. And if you create slides that contain fleshed out thoughts for audience members to review afterward, you create instant Death by PowerPoint were you to project them.

These two purposes are hopelessly disparate—the twain shall never meet. And yet you are likely one of tens of thousands who attempt it on a weekly or maybe even daily basis.

My clients and my readers never like to hear it, but it is nonetheless my duty to inform them that they must create two documents in order to do this right. Stay tuned, however, for a creative solution that assuages some of the pain.

### 4. You are required to

We acknowledge that there are circumstances in which a presenter feels compelled, or is literally required, to read a passage of carefully-composed text and display that same text.

I refer you to Page 9 for the two universal axioms of PowerPoint that describe what happens if you attempt this without special training. There are few things in life more annoying than when a presenter displays fully-formed sentences on screen and then proceeds to read them. And yet, in our travels, we have identified numerous situations in which that very practice is required:

■ An annual shareholders meeting, in which the presenter has a fiduciary responsibility to report both visually and verbally.

- A pet-adoption clinic that offers an orientation for new pet owners, including lots of DOs and DON'Ts.

- An airline's maintenance training program, in which proper procedure and protocol are of paramount importance.

In all of these cases, ensuring that the message is delivered takes precedence over the elegance of that delivery and we do not fault department heads for erring on the side of over-delivering a message, rather than under-delivering it.

And yet, we know what happens to audience members who get hammered with text—they tune out. Therefore, we refer you back to the sidebar on Page 44 and to the case study later in this chapter for our recommendation on how to deal with this reality.

## Case Studies in Text Reduction

Several significant phenomena take place when you succeed in reducing the amount of text that appears on your slides. Here is a digest of the discussion back on Page 40 where we introduce the Three-Word Challenge:

- Your slides are friendlier.

- Your pace improves.

- You create intrigue.

- You learn your material better.

There is one other important benefit: you become a better slide designer. It is entirely possible that the reason you do not feel confident designing a slide is because you have never had the opportunity. The most accomplished artists wouldn't fare well when faced with slides that contain five and six bullet points, all complete sentences. But when you open up some real estate, you give yourself the opportunity, perhaps for the first time, to think about how an idea could be expressed visually.

That would be a liberation—a deliverance!—for you and for anyone whose PowerPoint career has been defined by excessive text.

The following accounts are proof positive that reducing the amount of words that appear on a slide creates a more rewarding experience for everyone concerned.

## Southern California Edison and the Postage Stamp Syndrome

When the largest utility company in the western United States contacted us for presentation help, we knew that we would see some old habits that would die very hard. Edison's "Enterprise Resource Planning" rollout proved to be a difficult initiative to explain.

**1** Slides like this one didn't help. I asked why there was a little photo of a man staring off the slide (I was more diplomatic than that), and the answer was telling: "We wanted to break up the text a bit."

My clients' instincts were correct about providing relief from the text, but adding a tiny photo isn't the answer. In fact, a photo like this serves only to add to the visual clutter. I call this the "postage stamp syndrome"—one of several knee-jerk responses that we regularly observe to the problem of too much text.

**2** We insisted that the creative team at Edison take the Three-Word Challenge and they were equal to the task. Look at all of that fat that they identified...

**3** Immediately upon removing the excess verbiage, one of the team members said, "Wow, look at that poor guy stuck in the middle of nowhere." Indeed, the postage stamp seemed even more out of place when swimming in all of that wonderful white space. It was as if he were now screaming out to be made larger and more prominent.



**1**



**2**



**3**

**Part Three: Design**

**4** Once we sized the photo to its full height, it became even more apparent that having him looking off the slide was not such a good idea. When he was just a post-age stamp, my clients barely even noticed him. But with the opportunity to actually see elements for what they are, the Edison folks began to think more like designers.

**5** Moving him to the other side of the slide was the cognitive leap that had the biggest impact, and I remember well the "a-ha" moment that occurred when that move in turn suggested that the text be shifted to the right. At this point, the slide would have been deemed ready for its debut.

**6** I suggested two additional tweaks—moving the headline into the photo and removing the bullet characters from the text. The first serves to integrate the two elements better and the second reflects my general desire to remove bullets when they are not needed. With a short list like this, I believe that the bullet characters serve no real purpose, and the slide looks less "PowerPointish" without them.



4



5
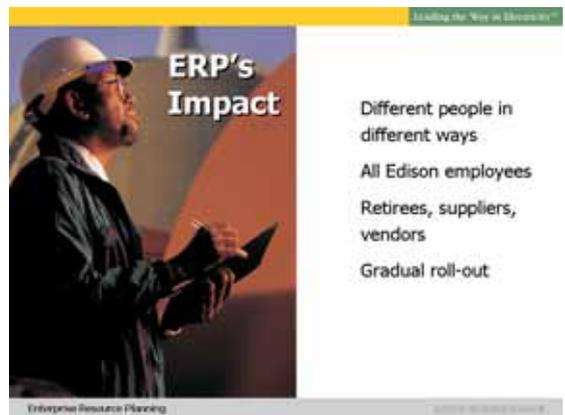


6

**7** It didn't take the design team long to seek other opportunities to create a better visual impact. The very next slide was another paragon of text excess, screaming to be delivered from its purgatory.

**8** Distilling this slide was easier—practice makes perfect—and the presenting team acknowledged that they could do just fine with the key talking points.

Getting buy-in from the presenters to undertake this kind of paradigm shift is vital. We also find it is easier to get their endorsement than you might think. They usually welcome the opportunity to be different and distinctive.
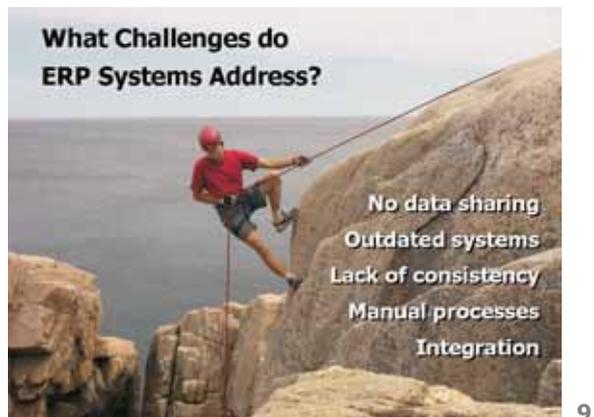
**9** The new slide design practically presented itself. This photo was purchased from photos.com and the areas of open space were perfect for the remaining text. Using the simple drop shadows helped readability in areas where there was not high contrast.
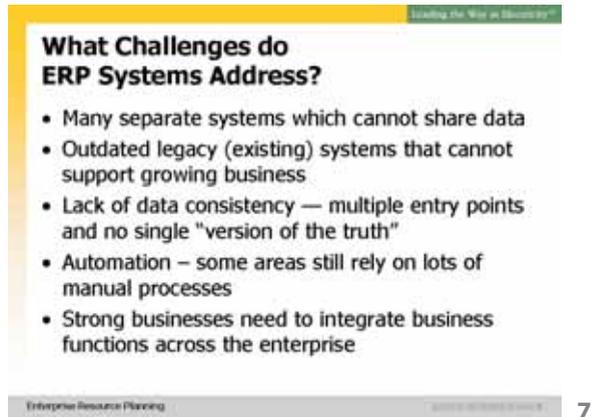
▼ Download 16-03.pptx to see the progressions of these two redesigned slides.

## When is a Bullet Not a Bullet?

US Airways had long felt that its course curriculum could stand improvement, and this part of the book is peppered with examples of the time that we spent with the maintenance training team.

**1** We encountered many slides like this one, in which a subtitle was formatted as a bullet, undoubtedly because that is the default layout for new slides. But a bullet implies a list of points—you cannot have a list of one.

**2** As we began "three wording" the text, we realized that the first bullet did not even need to be a subtitle. It was superfluous altogether, so we eliminated it.

**3** If ever there is an organization that owns compelling visuals, it would be an airline. This was one of countless aircraft-in-the-sky photos at our disposal. With the clouds providing an uneven background, we formatted the text placeholder with a touch of additional white (white fill, transparency of 65%), just enough to ensure readability.
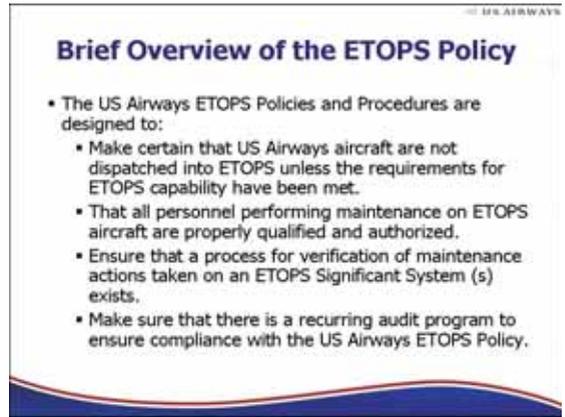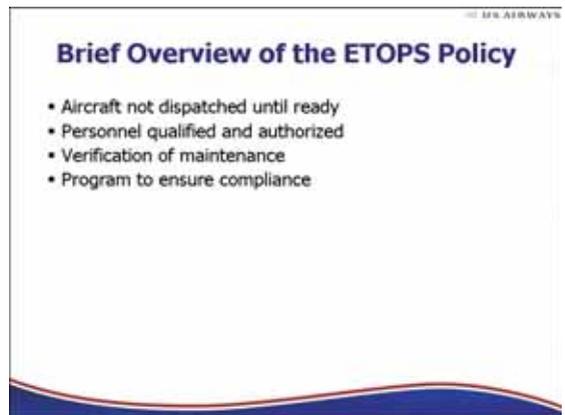
### City Managers Just Want to Get to Bed Earlier

When the City of Chino Hills (about 30 miles east of Los Angeles) brought me in to help with presentation design and delivery, I asked a simple question first: "What part of the process provides the most stress?" The answer was quick and unequivocal: "We don't want the city council to always be mad at us."

**1** The source of said ire? Slides like this one, often shown after 11:00p during long city council meetings. The slide number at the bottom-right is a clear indicator of the problem: city managers were trying to create a single deck for show and for print. See my earlier rant about how impossible that is. All of the information on this slide, by the way, was already emailed to councilmembers the day before and given to them when they entered the chambers. And now, nearing midnight, they have to look at it again. Imagine their thrill...

**2** The makeover began with the ineffective border that did not start at the slide's edge and poached too much space from the content area. I also turned the title into a header. "Heritage Professional Center" is the development in question, but the slide is really about the proposed agreement. That should be the title. Finally, I found the city's logo on their website and integrated it into the running footer. And no slide number!

**3** Those changes produced this result, which might be more attractive, but will do nothing to assuage the ire of city council members who want to get to sleep before midnight. So keep reading...

▼ Download 16-05.pptx and view it in Edit mode to see how this solution was designed and implemented.
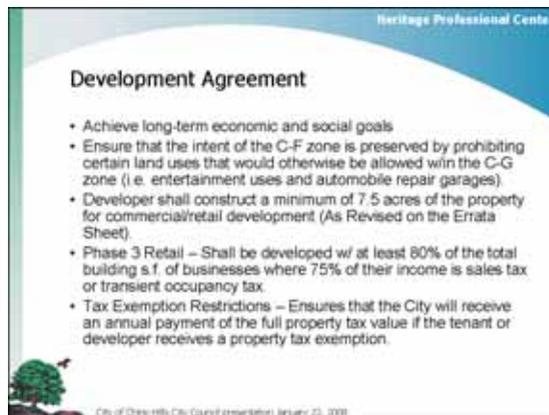
My redesign did not stop with a couple of new slide masters—I also made a stop at the Notes master, a part of the program that most users ignore. After all, who cares what the notes look like; they're just for your own purposes, right?

**4** I am suggesting here an altogether different use of the Notes page: use it for handouts. You can design the notes master just as you would the slide master—here you see the graphic element atop, the tree logo and running footer, type set in a serif typeface (this style is for print), and a page number. Notice that the slide thumbnail is gone altogether; it would be your option to remove it or to integrate it into the design of this page.

**5** Moving the text from the slide to the Notes page is incredibly easy, thanks to the small notes window normally visible below the slide.

Just copy and paste from the slide to the window...

**6** ...And then begin three wording the slide. Now this slide won't offend the sensibilities or strain the tired eyes of city councilmembers.

**7** Meanwhile, how's this for a professional-looking handout? Once the master was designed, it took all of 30 seconds to copy and paste the text and set the title in bold.

This is the way that every handout should be done—as a separate document. Using the Notes page to create the printed handout at least allows you to create both documents in the same PowerPoint file.
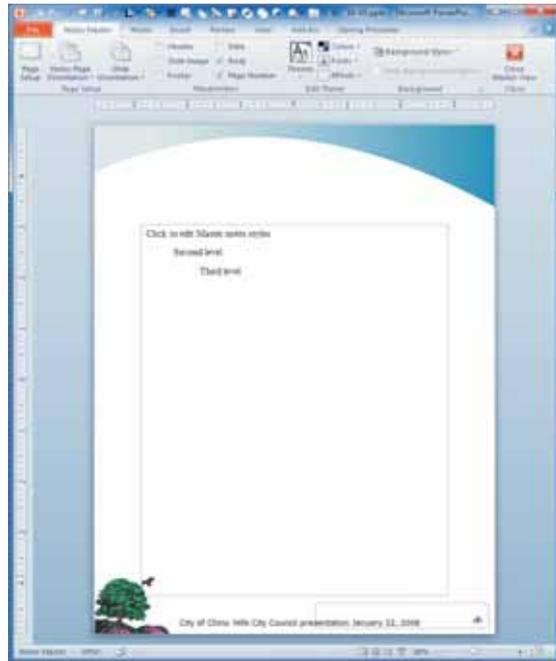


**4**
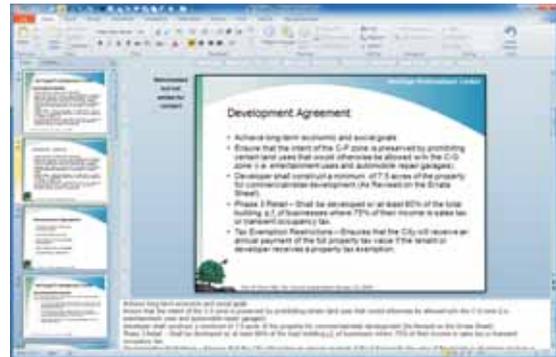


**5**



**6**

This became almost cookie-cutter-like for the city managers, as the three images below illustrate: the original slide was given a new design, the text was sent to the Notes page, and then the slide was reduced to key points.

And everyone got to bed on time.

▶ If you use the Notes master this way, make sure to save the file as a plain PPTX file, not a POTX template file. The Notes master is not preserved in template files so all of this nice design work would vanish.
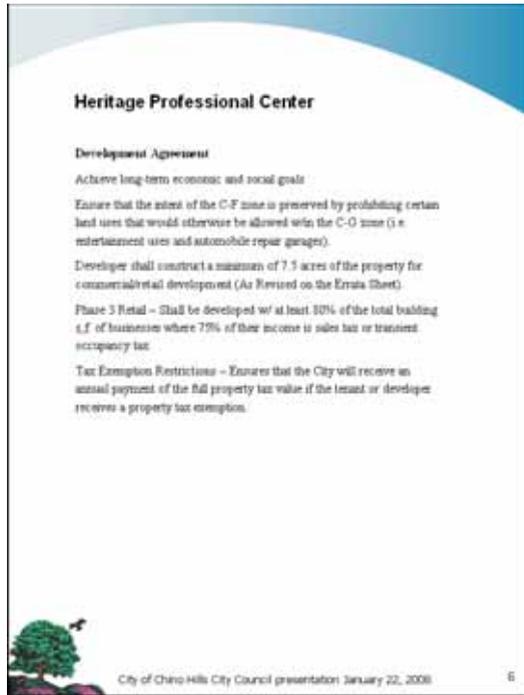
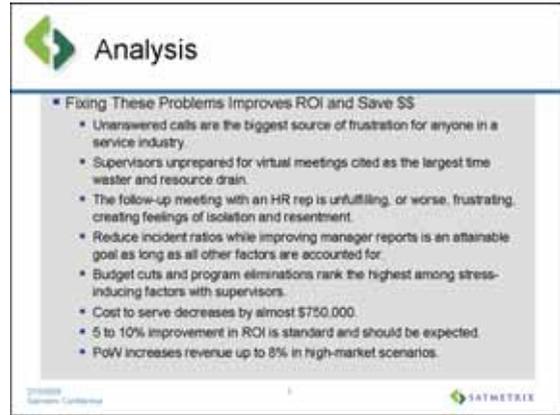## Display Every Word, Say Every Word...Just Not in that Order

Satmetrix is a client in San Mateo CA, about 15 miles south of San Francisco. Company reps dive deeply into the world of customer experience, feedback, and ongoing relations. They use sophisticated analysis and software, not just warm and fuzzies. They brought me in because their slides reflected that philosophy to excess. (As their work is highly sensitive and competitive, all of the content in these slides has been altered and rendered meaningless.)

**1** This slide is a poster child for many of the problems that we discuss in this book. The larger issue, however, is that company officials believe that because this information is so vital to the audience, presenters must say it out loud, as it is displayed here, *and* show it on the slide. We refer you to Page 9 and Universal Axiom No. 2.

**2** After the makeover and a bit of organizing of the content, the simple solution was to apply a touch of animation. Here, the slide displays just the three main categories of ideas that these points represent. Now let the presenter recite all of the content. Word for word, if necessary. Of course, now the presenter can't just read the slide; he or she needs to be better prepared than that.

**3** When done, one click brings in all of the required content, satisfying the brass. But when you say it all first and *then* display it, it is not nearly as bad as displaying it first and then reciting it. See the sidebar on Page 44 for more on this topic.

▼ Download 16-06.pptx to see how this simple animation can be so helpful.