

A practical guide to creating learning slide shows

In a learning context, slides have traditionally been used as ‘speaker support’ – visual aids to support live presentations. However, slide shows produced using Microsoft’s PowerPoint or Apple’s Keynote also provide a useful way to deliver packaged content for self-directed learning. This practical guide explores the potential for packaged slide shows as a learning tool and describes the many ways in which these can be developed and deployed.



Slides have traditionally been used primarily for speaker support

Media elements

A slide show can incorporate all major media elements. Although the dominant forms are always likely to be still images and text, presentation software also makes it possible to animate the text and images on slides, as well as to import audio and video.

Interactive capability

As we shall see, there are many ways of distributing slide shows. Many of these are essentially passive – you watch the slide show as you would a video. Although some formats – including native PowerPoint – have the potential for quite sophisticated interactivity, this is not the normal use of packaged slide shows and we will not be examining this application in any detail in this practical guide.

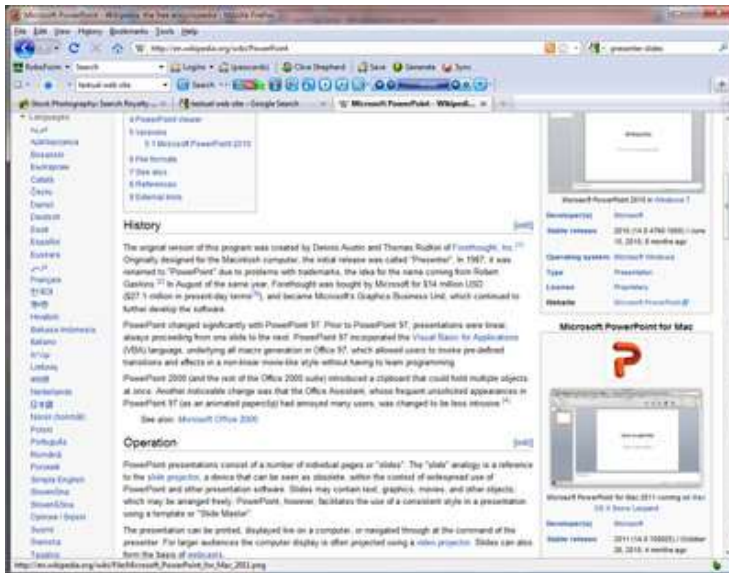
As passive media, the use of packaged slide shows is largely limited to the following learning strategies:

- *Exposition* – required viewing as part of a set curriculum
- *Exploration* – as developmental material for use by learners at their own discretion

Slide shows could also act as supporting material within other strategies – *instruction* and *guided discovery* – but only as one element in a blend.

Applications

While limited in terms of interactive capability, slide shows have a great many applications. Even without narration, they can provide a visually-dynamic and engaging way to present relatively small chunks of learning content. Where they are less suitable is in presenting large bodies of text. Text is much more satisfactorily handled on a web page or in a PDF, both of which more easily allow the reader to search and scan.



If you want to present lots of text, you're better off using a web page

When combined with an audio narration, slide shows take on many of the characteristics of video, allowing the learner to maintain visual focus on a sequence of images while these are explained in audio. Obviously if the intention is to depict actual events, in full motion, slides will not do as well as material captured with a video camera.

Formats

You have a wide range of distribution formats to choose from, each with its own distinct capabilities:

	<i>Animation?</i>	<i>Interactivity?</i>	<i>Narration?</i>	<i>Easy distribution?</i>
Native PowerPoint/Keynote	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes if users have the application used to create the presentation
PDF	No	No	No	Yes
Flash (using tools such as Articulate and Adobe Presenter)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Must be uploaded to an LMS/web server
Video	Yes	No	Yes	Yes but large files
SlideShare	No	No	Only with special 'Slidecasting' facility	Yes if users have Internet access. You can embed the presentations in blogs and web pages

What your slides must achieve

If your slide show is going to be packaged with an audio narration, then your slides have very much the same function as they would do in a live presentation – they convey the visual element, while a voice delivers the words. In this context, slides are visual aids. With photographs, illustrations, diagrams and charts, they capture the viewer’s attention, clarify meaning and improve retention. With the sparing use of on-screen text, they can also help to reinforce key elements of the verbal content, but the prime purpose is always visual.

Without narration, your slides have to accomplish both roles – the visual and the verbal. In this respect they need a very different design focus to a live presentation. Take the following example of a slide taken from a live presentation that was converted to stand alone, without narration, on slideshare.net. A section of the slide has been allocated to a running textual commentary, essentially a much simplified version of the original presenter’s words:



When there is no narration, the slide must be amended to include the verbal information

Not that this is the only way of displaying the verbal content. If, rather than converting a live presentation, you were designing a stand-alone and un-narrated slide show from scratch, you could use all sorts of devices to display the words, like the speech bubbles used in this example:



There are many ways to incorporate the narrative into the slides

Another consideration is the distance from which your slides will be viewed. In a live presentation, your audience is likely to be some way from the screen, whereas when the slides are used for self-study, they will be up close. Whether this matters depends on the device the audience will be using to view the presentation (this could be anything from a smart phone to a large PC monitor) and the size of the window in which your presentation will be displayed. You may be able to get away with displaying more detail than you would when live, but this needs testing.

An argument for imagery

Only an expert wordsmith can conjure up with words what a person, object or event actually looks like. Only an expert teacher can explain a concept or process clearly using words alone. And only a wonderful presenter can make a lasting impact on an audience without the use of imagery. As the saying goes, “a picture is worth ten thousand words”. Pictures show, quite effortlessly, what things really look like. They clarify concepts and processes. They stick in the memory. All you have to do is use them.

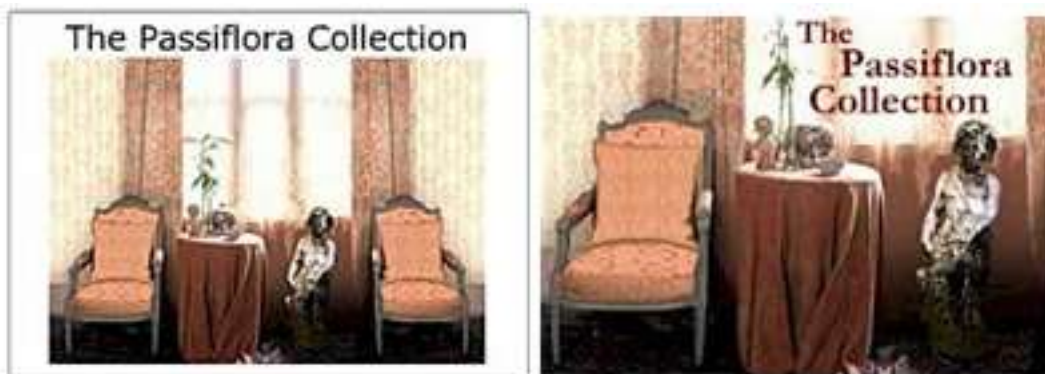


Charts clarify numeric data that might otherwise be indigestible

Pictures come in a variety of forms to suit different situations. Photographs portray what things look like; diagrams clarify concepts and processes; illustrations make the abstract more memorable. Presentation software such as PowerPoint makes it easy to employ pictures in all these forms. Your task is to avoid the lazy option – clip art – and to find the picture that really does tell a story.

Break the mould

It's all too simple to use the standard templates provided by your presentation software, but these won't always do justice to your images. Take these two examples:

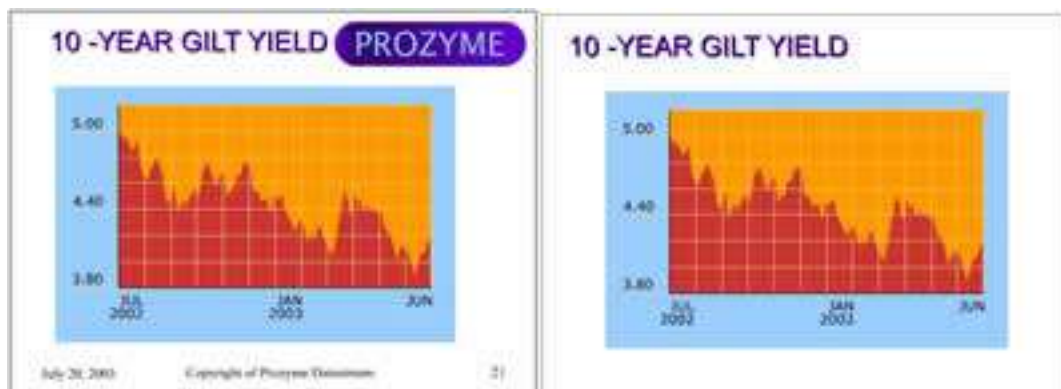


The title doesn't have to be centred at the top of the screen - it can be positioned to complement the image.



Again, with a little care you can break the mould. Here the image has been tinted blue

You can definitely do without the slide junk – the logos, headers and footers that appear on every slide. There's a place for your logo and that's on the title slide (OK and maybe at the end as well). And you don't really need all that clutter at the bottom of each slide – you're producing slides, remember, not a report.



Remove the slide junk - your corporate communications department doesn't always know best

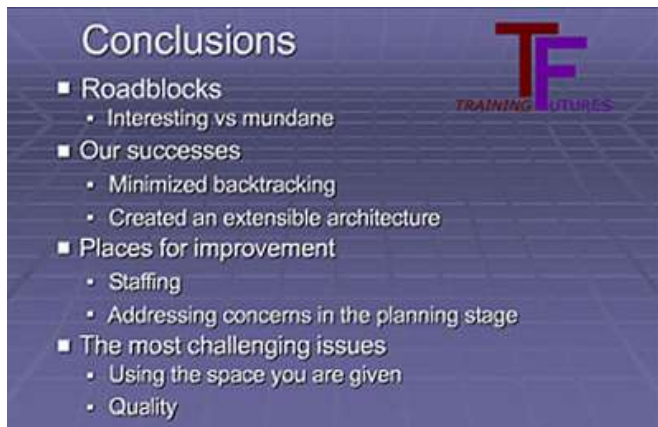
Text is also OK in moderation

You've probably heard of the expression "death by PowerPoint". You've probably experienced it.



Admit it, you've been there ...

Well, by far the biggest complaint you will hear from presentation audiences is that the slides contain too much text. In his book *The Great Presentation Scandal*, John Townsend relates how he counted the number of words and figures on every slide at a conference he was attending. The overall average was 76. That's right, 76.



If you've got two levels of bullets then you've no longer got a visual aid

Given this, you may find it surprising that we could be recommending the use of text as a visual aid when the real problem is that there's far too much of it. This is a fair point, but text can be useful as a visual aid, when you need to highlight the start of a new section, emphasise a key point, list a number of related points or present data in the form of a table.

If you do keep the amount of text on your slides to a minimum, it will have that much more impact when it does appear; particularly if you know when to use it and how to lay it out like the professionals. If you obey a few simple guidelines, that's what you will achieve.

Use your slides to tell a story

A presentation is much more than a collection of independent thoughts accompanied by visual aids – however interesting the thoughts and however brilliant the visuals. Just like a novel, a radio play or a film, it has a beginning, an end and a carefully planned route in between.

Too many presentations look like they have been constructed by simply extracting slides from previous presentations. Although re-using slides is fine, if they are appropriate to the task in hand, this is never going to be enough to do the job. Like a film director, you have to look at the big picture, using words and images to manipulate your audience's attention and their emotions. There is no black art to this; you just need a little imagination and a simple structure.

Packaging up a live presentation

The way you approach the narration will depend on whether you are (1) packaging up a presentation that you have previously delivered live, or (2) creating a stand-alone slide show from scratch. In the case of the former, the presentation will most likely represent you and your perspective on the topic in hand – you will want to record the voiceover yourself and retain as much of the personality of the original presentation as possible. That means keeping it natural and informal. Assuming you didn't read from a script when you presented live (and let's hope that's the case), then you won't want to

read from a script now. Try to capture the buzz of the live presentation by imagining you are presenting to a live audience. Or why not record it live? You can always edit it down afterwards to remove any superfluous elements.



If you packaging up a presentation you delivered live, you'll want to retain its personality

Designing specifically for stand-alone use

On the other hand, you may be designing a slide show that will only ever be used as a piece of learning content. It is not intended as a personal statement and it won't be attributed to you. In this case you are almost definitely best off writing a script and you should seriously consider using a professional voiceover artist to deliver this. Why? Because professional voiceover artists are very good at reading a script so it doesn't sound like they're reading a script. By and large, the rest of us aren't.

Script for speaking

When scripting, it's hard to avoid slipping into report writing mode. Keep reminding yourself that the words you are writing will be read aloud, not read from the screen. Try saying the words out loud yourself and keep revising them until you can put them across effortlessly.



Remember your script will be read aloud, not as a report

Use a conversational tone

Whatever you do, avoid ‘corporate drone’. Write as you would speak. That means short sentences, simple language, the active voice (“The cat ate the mouse” not “The mouse was eaten by the cat”), and a free use of contractions (“I can’t remember ...” not “I cannot remember ...”). You can also help the voiceover artist by making absolutely clear (perhaps in bold type) which words need special emphasis.

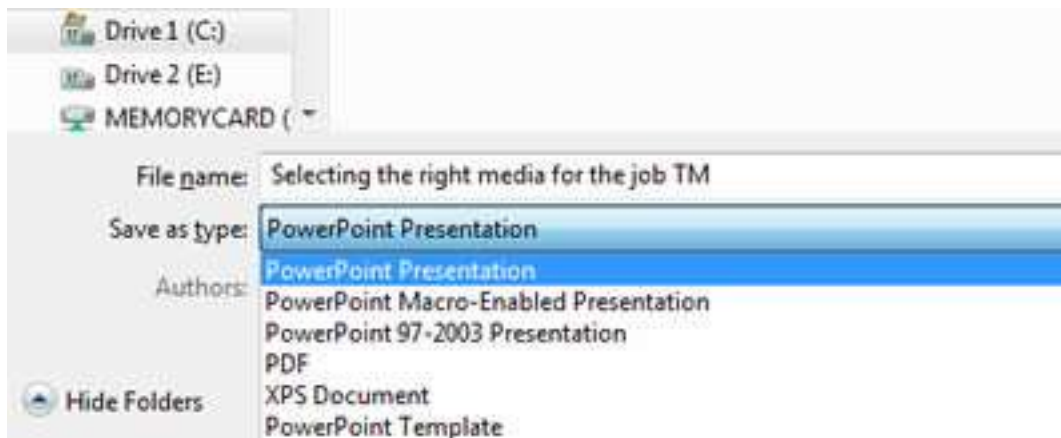
Don’t duplicate your voiceover as on-screen text

Your learner’s brain can cope with one verbal channel (in this case the voiceover) but not two. If words are coming at you from two places at once, you’ll just overload. If absolutely necessary, emphasise key points and headings with on-screen text, but please don’t display your script verbatim.

Let’s move on to explore what’s involved in getting your slide show out there in front of as many eyeballs as possible.

Keeping it simple

Your first option is to send round your presentation in its native PowerPoint format or to make this available for download. This will work as long as everyone who is likely to want to view the slides has their own copy of PowerPoint and are able to view the slides in the format in which you have saved them (for example, to view presentations saved in the pptx format, viewers must have PowerPoint 2007 or later). Presentations saved in native PowerPoint format will be bulky but they can still be edited by the recipient (if you regard that as an advantage).



PowerPoint allows you to save in a number of backwards-compatible formats but also as PDF files

A simple alternative is to save your slides directly from PowerPoint into PDF format. This reduces compatibility problems as most people have a PDF reader. It will also reduce file size. However, the files will no longer be editable.

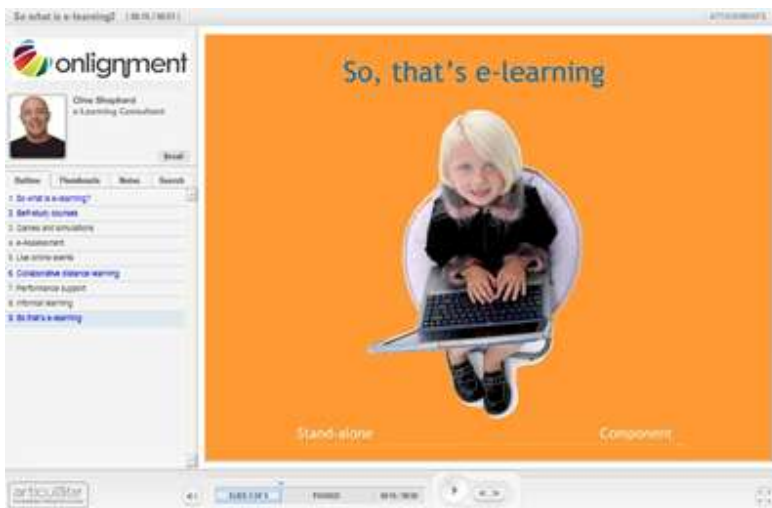
Converting to Flash

You can achieve a more polished and web-friendly result using one of a number of tools that will convert your presentation into Flash format, along with a host of useful additional features. Perhaps the best-known of these tools are Articulate Presenter and Adobe Presenter. Both work similarly in that they sit within PowerPoint itself as an add-in, with their own ribbons or drop-down menus (depending on the version of PowerPoint).



The functions of Articulate Presenter are available as a ribbon in PowerPoint 2007 and 2010

Using these tools you can add narration, organise your slides into sections and sub-sections, insert additional media such as Flash animations and videos, and then publish into Flash for upload to your intranet, learning management system or other web site. Actually these tools can do a lot more in terms of adding interactivity, but that goes beyond the scope of this practical guide.



This presentation has been converted to Flash for delivery online

Exporting to video

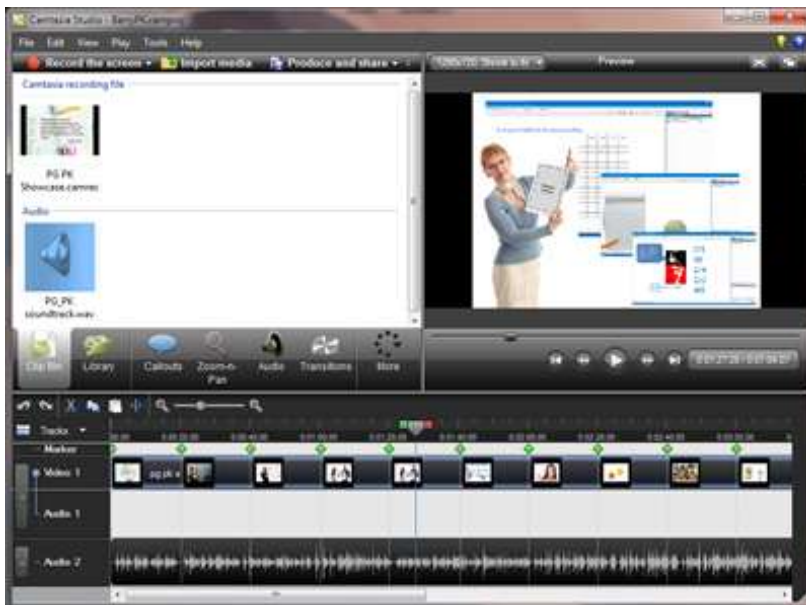
If you just want your slides to be viewed in a linear fashion, from start to finish, and you are prepared to add an audio narration, then you should seriously consider distributing in video format. One attraction is the ease with which you can upload video to sites such as YouTube. Another is the fact that nearly all mobile devices will support video, whereas Flash can be a problem, particularly on Apple devices.

You need a tool which will capture your slides, allow you to add narration and then publish to a suitable video format. If you are happy to go with the Windows Media Video (WMV) format, then you can do this directly from the latest version of PowerPoint. If you want a bigger choice of formats and more editing flexibility, try using a tool like Camtasia.



Camtasia can also be installed as a PowerPoint add-in, allowing you to access the Camtasia controls direct from the ribbon

Once you have captured your slides (including any embedded animations and videos), the Camtasia Studio software allows you to make edits and export to a wide range of video formats.



Camtasia Studio

Publish on SlideShare.net

Another option to consider, if you want your presentations to have the widest possible online presence, is to publish to a site like SlideShare.net. What YouTube is to videos and Flickr is to photos, SlideShare is to presentations.

The process is really simple. You set up an account and then upload your PowerPoint or Keynote slides, which are then automatically converted into SlideShare's Flash-based format. Users can view and comment on the slides on the SlideShare site or you can embed the slides in a web page or posting.



[A presentation on SlideShare.net](#)

And that concludes this practical guide. Over to you now to make some great slide shows!