Less is more: guidelines for METM presentation slides

"The key to success is to make certain your slideshow is a visual aid and not a visual distraction." (NCSL, 2017)

Slides help you get your message across in a presentation. But you must use them with care. Poor slides can distract your audience and hobble your talk.

To help you create slides that etch your points in the audience's brain, we've put together this list of guidelines. Please keep them in mind when preparing your METM presentation.

Treat your slides as props

"Your slides shouldn't be the star of the show" (Reynolds, 2016)

Slides are meant to be a visual aid that supports your presentation. They are not the presentation itself; just a part of it. Good slides are almost meaningless without the narration. So don't write out your presentation on the slides. Doing so makes you, the speaker, superfluous.

Don't have too many slides

"A good rule of thumb is one slide per minute." (NCSL, 2017)

Too many slides can lose your audience. Ask if each slide is necessary. Does the point you're making really need a slide? Will a brief explanation do instead?

Set up each slide before showing it

"The best speakers set up the slide before they show it." (Alley)

Make your point and then show the slide that illustrates or emphasizes it.

Use as few words as possible

"With text, less is almost always more" (Ted Blog, 2014)

Text-heavy slides are a poor use of the medium. Slides are not conducive to reading and poring over details. Use key phrases and only put essential information on your slides.

How many words per slide? Recommendations range from six words per slide to six lines of up to eight words.
Don't use bullet points

"Your audience engages less, remembers less, agrees less and likes you less when you use bullet points." (Potter, 2017)

Try to avoid using bullet points. Make each would-be bullet point a slide. If you have to use bullet points, have six at the most on a slide.

Use visuals

"Images help the audience remember your message more clearly." (Alley)

Use photographs, icons, diagrams, graphs and videos to illustrate your points. Just remember:

- Use large images, preferably one per slide.
- Don't use distracting animation.
- Use visuals that enhance meaning (there must be a point to them).

Use transitions and special effects sparingly (if at all)

"Focus on your message, not the technology." (NCSL, 2017)

Too many special effects and transitions can distract and bore your audience. Overuse may suggest that your content is uninteresting.

Use a large, readable font

"With typography, go for legibility over fun." (French, 2016)

Use a single sans-serif font, such as Arial, Verdana or Trebuchet MS, of at least 24 points in size. Aim for 40 points. Also:

- Don't use italics (they are hard to read quickly).
- Don't use more than two fonts per slide. Too many fonts tire the eyes.
- Use no more than four fonts for the entire presentation.
- Use the same font for all headings.

Use contrasting colours and a consistent theme

"Use colors that have enough contrast, especially between the background and the content." (Noer, 2013)

Use a dark font colour on a light background or vice versa. Keep the theme and colours consistent across all slides. Too many colours can distract your audience.

Distribute your handout at the end or put it online
"If the audience can read everything you're going to say, all suspense is lost" (NCSL, 2017)

Put the text you might otherwise have put on slides in a handout or online (e.g., on your blog, social media or the METM archive). Just make sure you hand out any document (or link) at the end. Otherwise you may have people reading your handout instead of listening to you.

Don't read (or even face) your slides

"Reading text ruins a presentation." (NCSL, 2017)

Your slides are for your audience, not you. Always face the audience, never your slides. Keep this in mind when practising your talk – don't look at your slides when rehearsing.

Have your slides proofread

"Typos, as small as they may seem, will quickly tarnish your credibility." (Josh, 2016)

Get a second pair of eyes to look over your slides before you present. Doing so can save you the embarrassment of having a typo pointed out mid-presentation. A proofreader may also give you other useful feedback.

References


This guide was prepared by MET Secretary Rob Lunn. Last updated January 2019.