

Slide Presentations the UMark Way

a guide for University of Wisconsin–Madison communicators and designers

Let's face it: Most presentations are bad.

Too many slide presentations are hard to read, hard to follow, and are poorly designed for their goal. And as programs like PowerPoint continue to add features, they're increasingly bogged down with bells and whistles that detract from the impact you want to make. At their worst, they violate best practices, UW brand standards, and principles of good design.

But as designers and communicators, we know that good design isn't about making things pretty, or gilding the lily. Good design is about problem-solving. That's why we've compiled this set of resources and best practices so you can create slide decks that solve your problems, leverage the UW–Madison brand as you highlight your own, and allow you to do your best work with the least amount of pain.

Review these best practices.

- **Sharpen up your title.** Titles are like cucumbers: the crisper, the better. Keep it brief, and consider a call to action, inviting curiosity, or even using numbers: "Improvement of Student Retention through the Leadership Initiative Pilot Program" is less inviting to the audience than "Six Ways We Made Badgers for Life."
- **Less is more.** Simplify and limit the number of words on each screen. Not only are text-heavy presentations boring and hard to follow, but they also distract the attention away from the speaker.
- **But bigger is better.** Keep the font large enough. Go no smaller than 24 point text (some say no smaller than 30), for accessibility and readability.
- **Consider your case.** Limit putting words in all-capital letters for accessibility and readability's sake. Title case and sentence case are more accessible options.
- **Keep it clean.** Excessive patterns can also reduce readability. Avoid distracting patterns underneath text, or text on images that don't provide much color contrast (black text on a red background is notoriously difficult to read).
- **Reject funky fonts.** They can be tough to read for some audience members. Additionally, the computer on which you present must have the fonts you're using downloaded on the machine, or it will revert to a default that may ruin your presentation's layout. Try sticking to sans serif fonts, which are easier to read on slides.

- **Ditch the gimmicks.** Avoid the use of flashy slide transitions. These features may seem impressive at first but are distracting, and often make the presentation look amateurish. If you do decide on slide transitions — for example, to have your slides fade in, or to have individual bullet points appear as you click — think strategically about the *function* of these animations. In other words, what are you trying to do *for* your audience? Let your answer to that question guide your decision.
- **Not reading is fundamental.** Avoid using your slides as a teleprompter. It's so tempting (and faster) to just put all your copy on the slides and read away. But slides should reinforce your words, not repeat them. Remember, the content of your slides is for the audience, not for you. If you need notes, great! Use them.

Take advantage of UW resources.

Leave them with something better.

Does your presentation contain complex charts or diagrams? Are there facts, figures, or vocabulary you'd like your audience to consider more closely? Instead of printing up your slides, leave them with something they can really chew on: create a handout. We have a [simple handout template](#) for use right in PowerPoint that makes it easy.

You can get your handouts professionally printed at the UW's own [Digital Publishing and Printing Services](#), part of DoIT. Whether black & white or color, recycled paper or fine stock, you can get your pieces created and delivered quickly and professionally.

Make use of our professional photos and graphics.

Instead of using clip art (which can be cheap-looking) or random images off the internet (which can be cheap-looking *and* possibly illegal), consider using graphics from the [design toolkit](#) and photos from the [photo library](#). They look great, save time, and are free for all campus communicators.

Leverage the UW brand.

No need to re-invent the wheel every time you have to do a presentation. Our [professionally designed slide templates](#) range from formal to more casual; from minimalist to lively, all while leveraging the UW brand. They allow you to find your own presentation style, while taking advantage of your connection to the UW brand and its own generation-spanning relationship with audiences.