Beyond Bullet Points…
Getting your message across

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Introduction

Welcome to the notes of the presentation on “Beyond Bullet Points – Getting your message across”, delivered at the Nordics Investor Relations Conference on June 18th 2008 in Copenhagen.

What you see on this page and through the rest of this handout was created from the Notes Page view of the slides, by using Microsoft® Office PowerPoint®. The slide area that you saw on screen during the presentation is on the top half of each of these pages, and the notes area that contains my explanation is on the bottom half of the page.

This is the recommended way for sending PowerPoint files, to ensure that a written description accompanies each slide.
Today the word “PowerPoint” is synonymous with the word “presentation,” and few people today would dream of starting a presentation without using this popular software tool. It has influenced our culture so profoundly, that many organizations report that PowerPoint files have replaced the written memo as a primary way of communicating ideas.

As quickly and as widely as the tool has been adopted, it’s sometimes surprising that people are saying things about PowerPoint that are not so nice. Words you might hear are dull, boring, makes me fall asleep… It’s common to hear the phrase “Death by PowerPoint” expressing the frustrations some audiences feel about the tool. The question “PowerPoint: A powerful tool poorly used or a poor tool overused?” was recently being discussed on a weblog. And even Wired magazine featured an article titled “PowerPoint is evil.” (Wired, September 2003)

But most people would agree that it is not PowerPoint in itself that is good or evil, but rather a tool that can be used either way, depending on the user.
It’s hard to believe that PowerPoint has been around for less than 20 years, but in that short amount of time it has dramatically transformed the communications landscape in both business and education.

The reality is that PowerPoint is not going away anytime soon. We all use the tool, and it is up to us to figure out how to use it in the smartest way. One popular trend emerging today is the concept of “story.” Perhaps because of a world that’s increasing dramatically in quantity of information, we may be returning to the idea of a story as way to make sense out of complexity.

But few people would use the word “PowerPoint” and “story” in the same breath, and in fact, some people would say that PowerPoint and its predictable bullet points are actually the opposite of a story. Whatever the case, to see how far away we stand from communicating clearly and coherently with PowerPoint, we need to assess where we are today.
In search of research…

And although PowerPoint and similar applications have been around for such a long time, there is hardly any scientific evidence. When you talk about good PowerPoint practices, you’re probably discussing the right font size, the use of templates, what background to show, … and maybe the 6–by–6 rule (stating that every slide should have 6 lines with 6 words).

So there is no specific PowerPoint —or more general business presentation— related research. But we can borrow from other fields, i.e. cognitive science and educational psychology.

One person who has done some great work in this area is professor Richard E. Mayer. His research on multimedia learning has implications on our use of PowerPoint, although there is no direct link to the use of bullet points.
3 kinds of memory

For our purposes, scientists nowadays recognize 3 ‘types’ of memory:

1. sensory: this is the place where we briefly store what we see and hear when we look at and listen to the world around us.

2. long–term memory: the part of our mind where we store information over an extended period of time, sometimes even as long as a lifetime. This is where you would like your audience to store the new information you’re delivering them while doing a presentation.

3. working (or short–term) memory: a temporary holding area for information, it’s the part of our mind where we hold our attention.

Sensory and long–term memory have (almost) unlimited capacity, but working memory is severely limited in its capacity to process new information.

Based on an influential paper from 1956 by George A. Miller, “The magical number 7, plus or minus 2”, it was long thought that we can hold around 7 chunks of information in our working memory. Recent research however has even lowered this number to about 3 or 4.
Reaching the limit of working memory

The limited capacity of working memory to process new information creates a narrow passage, much like the eye of the needle, that stands between the sensory information that is being presented and the information that eventually is stored in long-term memory.

This means that when we show more information in our presentation than the working memory can hold and process, our audience will only remember bits and pieces. Trying to push more information through the eye of the needle will not help… or when we overload the working memory with irrelevant information, fewer pieces that are relevant will be stored.

Mayer tested this by using 2 different presentations: a 1st presentation with interesting, but irrelevant graphics; a 2nd one with the same information, but without the irrelevant graphics. He then measured the retention, i.e. the ability to recall information, and transfer, i.e. the ability to creatively apply the info.

Results show that audiences who experienced the 2nd presentation retained 69% more and were able to apply 105% more creatively than the group who received the 1st presentation.

So… don’t overload working memory, “Less is more!”
There are actually 2 channels

Another relevant element from cognitive research on working memory is that there are actually 2 channels: a visual channel and a verbal channel.

What the audience sees is processed through the visual channel. What we tell them through the narrative we use is going through the auditory or verbal channel.

We experience this two–channel concept when we watch (and listen to) a movie. There the visual channel is in sync with the verbal one, without them having to use bullet points!
Some common myths

1. Myth: There is no need for me to use graphical cues to point out the organization of my presentation.
   Truth: Research shows that people learn better when you use visual cues to highlight a presentation’s organization.

2. Myth: People will learn more if I show more.
   Truth: Research shows that people learn better when information is presented in bite-size pieces.

3. Myth: I don’t need to worry if what I say doesn’t match with my slide.
   Truth: Research shows that people better understand a multimedia presentation when they do not have to split their attention.

4. Myth: It’s OK to read my bullet points from the screen.
   Truth: Research shows that people understand a multimedia presentation better when the words are presented as verbal narration only.

5. Myth: Graphics are nice to have, but they are not essential.
   Truth: Research shows that people learn better from words and pictures than from words alone, if the pictures illustrate what the words say (so not when they are just decoration).

6. Myth: People learn more when I use special effects to spice up my presentation.
   Truth: Research shows that people learn better when extraneous information is removed.
The conventional approach vs “Beyond Bullet Points”

The standard approach used by people does not make use of the two–channel concept. What we see in most presentations is that all information is stored in the slide area, i.e. both the visual and the verbal information. This creates an overload, while the audience tries to make sense of all of this information.

And while they are doing that, they are most likely not listening any longer to the speaker. When they do shift their attention again to the speaker, they try to relate what they hear to what they see… this is the so–called split–attention effect, which creates an extra workload on the already strained working memory and further reduces learning.

Another reason why you should use the off–screen text box is because it can be an rich resource for information while doing the presentation, especially when you use the presenter view in PowerPoint.

And it also is an excellent tool to produce handouts (like this one).
About Beyond Bullet Points

The Beyond Bullet Points approach is a method developed about 5 years ago by Cliff Atkinson to create powerful presentations. It’s much more than about pretty PowerPoint slides—it’s about finding the clear and compelling structure that cuts through the clutter and guides people to memorable understanding.

The approach got a lot of media attention—especially in the US—when Cliff designed the presentations that helped persuade a court jury to award a $253 million verdict to the plaintiff in the nation's first Vioxx trial in 2005, which Fortune magazine called "frighteningly powerful."

Since the early days, this groundbreaking approach is being applied by a rapidly growing number of users, who put it into daily practice in organizations, schools, companies, trainings, workshops, … all over the world.
Step 1
Write a script to focus your ideas

The heart and brain of Beyond Bullet Points... the story template

The story template is the starting point for any presentation using the Beyond Bullet Points approach. And it does not start in PowerPoint... but rather in Word! How's that for a start on a 'PowerPoint' presentation?

This story template becomes the script for your presentation, where you build up the story and further develop it.

If you really want to learn how to use this template, get hold of Cliff Atkinson's book “Beyond Bullet Points”, where he describes his approach in detail, with lots of examples and background.
Setting up the framework for your story

The first part of the story template —and the presentation that you will create eventually—is about setting up the story from the audience’s viewpoint:

1. Setting: Where am I?
2. Role: Who am I here?
3. Point A: What challenge do I face?
4. Point B: Where do I want to be?
5. Call to Action: How do I get from A to B?.

The purpose of this 1st part is to lay down an appropriate pattern to orient the audience, interest them, engage them, motivate them and then focus on the way forward.

In a later stage of the Beyond Bullet Points approach, this story thread is then transformed in the first 5 opening slides of our presentation.
### Building a memorable structure

In the 2nd part of the story template, you distill down the information to 3 or 4 top-level points, using a classical technique called a logic tree. Each one of the columns describes one of your major ideas in increasing levels of detail as you move from left to right. This approach is inspired by Barbara Minto's book, “The Pyramid Principle”, which describes a hierarchical way of structuring ideas for presentations.

This structure also allows for scalability. As the 1st column includes the 3 high-level points of your presentation, you will tell these if you have 5 minutes.

If you have 15 minutes, you will also include the 2nd level in your presentation. And finally, you include as well the 3rd detailed level in a presentation of 45 minutes.

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Step 2
Storyboard your script to clarify your ideas

Moving from the script to the storyboard

When you established the firm foundation of your persuasive story structure, you also set the stage for your PowerPoint storyboard. In this stage you move from the script that you built up using the story template to a storyboard in PowerPoint, by exporting it from Word to PowerPoint.
The headlines become a clear and coherent story backbone

A first draft of your presentation

The first version of this storyboard will only show the headlines, with blank, white slides. You could actually present it already, as all the information related to the story you have carefully designed in the previous stage is included.
Planning projected words and spoken visuals balances cognitive load

Using PowerPoint’s Notes Page view to synchronize two channels

You begin working on your storyboard in PowerPoint’s Notes Page view, which allows you to see the slide area alongside an off–screen notes area. This way you ensure that the visual and verbal channel are synchronized, as the slide area will be simple and concise, while your narration is included as complete sentences in the notes area.

This is a unified design approach that produces simple and clear slides, a meaningful handout, and an integrated multimedia experience.
Step 3
Produce your script to bring your story to life

Advanced Verbal–Visual Techniques

Once you have completed the storyboard, including all the information and your narration in the notes field, you will finally produce a presentation-ready product. You do this by adding visual and graphical elements to the slides, that will support and enhance your message, and that will appeal to the audience.
Try a range of visual techniques to explain your headline

Visual support for your message

You can add different kinds of visuals to support your message:
1. images and photos
2. graphs and diagrams, with a simple and clear structure
3. screen shots

The key element here is for you to select or produce visuals that fit fluently with each other and with the story you want to tell.

No other visuals—like company logos, visuals from standard templates, backgrounds, ...—should be included in the slide area, as they might again distract your audience.

And of course, it is all right to use text, if it is the best way to convey your key message.
Conclusion

If you take the steps from the Beyond Bullet Points approach, you will reinforce the most important ideas in your presentation in a hierarchical sequence. This helps your audience to remember the most important information you want them to; and also helps them to apply the information creatively.

Although some of these techniques are very simple, the effect is sophisticated because using them manages short-term memory effectively. This allows your audience to focus on the main idea that you are explaining with your spoken words. And they will now focus on you instead of the screen, increasing their understanding along with the quality of the presentation and the level of engagement.

Good luck!
Books to inspire you


4. Richard E. Mayer, “Multimedia Learning”, 2001 (isbn 978-0-521-78749-9) or “The Cambridge Handbook of Multimedia Learning”, (isbn 978-0-521-54751-2). Both books cover the field of multimedia learning, the second one has more content, but is also more expensive. Rather technical descriptions of the research underneath Beyond Bullet Points.


Some web resources

If you want to know more, here are some links to websites:

1. You can find Cliff Atkinson’s website at www.beyondbulletpoints.com. It has extra material, some of it for free, and a discussion forum. Cliff does (almost) weekly webinars, the recordings are available on this site as well.

2. The Presentation Zen weblog by Garr Reynolds is very informative, you can find it at www.presentationzen.com. He also recently published a book with the same topic. (see list of books)
Om Sapiens Consulting

Vores arbejde handler grundlæggende om at gøre mennesker klogere på sig selv og hinanden. Til eget og fælles bedste. Derfor har vi også valgt navnet Sapiens, der betyder visdom på latin og indgår i 'homo sapiens', som betyder menneske.

Ydelser

Arrangementer - tema eksempler
- Mentaltræning for erhvervsfolk: mental styrke, når det gælder.
- Fra stress og frustration til målrettet energi og handlekraft.
- Rolle, identitet og image.
- Lederens personlige ressourcer.
- Personlig power og gennemslagskraft.
- Disney vejen til effektiv udvikling af kreative, holdbare ideer.
- Kommunikation med gennemslagskraft - verbalt og med kropssproget.
- Præsentationer, som når ud over scenekanten ("beyond bullet points").

Åbne uddannelser
- NLP Business Practitioner
- NLP Business Master
- NLP Business Trainer
- Ledelse i topform: Mentaltræner til erhvervslivet

Consulting
- Leder- og medarbejderudvikling
- Team-udvikling
- Organisationsudvikling

Coaching og mentaltræning
- Team-coaching
- Leder-coaching
- Medarbejder-coaching
- Personlig coaching
- Situationsbestemt coaching

Profilanalyser
- Kend dig selv
- Kend dig selv som leder
- Kend dit team
- DISC & PI
  Følger regler og retningslinjer udarbejdet af Dansk psykologforening og Dansk Management Råd.

Metoder
- Erhvervs-NLP
- Erhvervs- og idrætspsykologi
- Mentaltræning
- Coaching
- Situationsbestemt Ledelse (SLII)
- Kreative metoder, fx Disney modellen
- Person- og teamprofil-analyser samt lederstilsanalyser.

Udvalgte referencer: