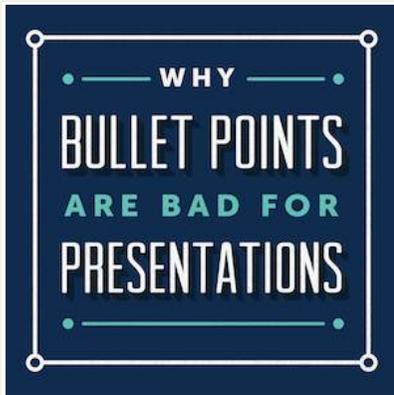


The Scientific Reason Why Bullets Are Bad for Presentations

By [Leslie Belknap](https://blog.slideshare.net/author/lesliebelknap/) (<https://blog.slideshare.net/author/lesliebelknap/>) on August 31, 2015



<https://blog.slideshare.net/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/presentations-Why-Bullet-Points-Are-Bad-Title-1000x1000-blog.jpeg>) You've probably heard this advice before: Don't use bullet points in your presentations. But do you know *why* [presentation design experts](http://www.ethos3.com/) (<http://www.ethos3.com/>) are so adamantly opposed to the bullet point format?

Here's the simple, but perhaps surprising, explanation to why bullet points are bad for presentations: **Bullet points make information more difficult to remember**, especially when the bullet point lists are accompanied with auditory information. This is not a conjecture; it is backed by credible research.

The Value of Visualizations

(<http://job.sagepub.com/content/early/2014/04/01/2329488414525444.abstract>)

In 2014, the International Journal of Business Communication published the results from *The Use of Visualization in the Communication of Business Strategies* (<http://job.sagepub.com/content/early/2014/04/01/2329488414525444.abstract>), a study designed to gather empirical evidence regarding whether the use of visualization is superior to text in the communication of business strategies. The results of that experiment confirmed that lists of text are ineffective for presentations. **Slides with visuals** (<http://www.ethos3.com/work/infographics/we-live-in-a-visual-world/>) are undeniably more effective than slides with text.

Specifically, the study concluded:

Subjects who were exposed to a graphic representation of the strategy paid significantly more attention to, agreed more with, and better recalled the strategy than did subjects who saw a (textually identical) bulleted list version.

In other words, when your slides are comprised of lists of text, your audience will struggle to pay attention to your slides, they will find it difficult to agree with your message, and they will retain a less-than-ideal amount of the information.

The Limits of Working Memory

Digging deeper into the reason bullet points are bad, [Dr. Chris Atherton](http://finiteattention.net/) (<http://finiteattention.net/>), an award-winning lecturer in psychology and a user experience consultant for organizations such as Skype and the BBC, discovered that the limits of working memory are to blame for the failure of bullet points.

In [this](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OwOuVc1Orlg) (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OwOuVc1Orlg>) 2011 speech, Dr. Atherton details the results of her research:



At the beginning of her lesson, Dr. Atherton explains that when you accompany a lecture with bullet point slides, your audience will switch between reading and listening. This type of *task switching* is cognitively exhausting.

When presenters minimize the cognitive exertion (<http://www.ethos3.com/2015/01/how-to-minimize-the-extraneous-load-of-your-presentations/>) required to absorb the information by avoiding long lists of text on their slides, audience members are able to use their remaining cognitive capabilities to actually process the information being presented. By actively processing the information instead of attempting to simultaneously read the slides as well as listen to the presenter, audience members are more likely to retain the meaning of the presentation.

Dr. Atherton recommends **creating slides with minimal text to limit the extraneous load** (<https://www.google.com/webhp?sourceid=chrome-instant&ion=1&espv=2&ie=UTF-8#q=ethos3%20extraneous>) **of your presentation**. In addition, she also recommends using visuals (<http://www.ethos3.com/2015/04/why-bullet-points-kill-presentations/>) to communicate complex concepts. Since the area of the human brain that processes visuals has a working memory capacity that is separate from the short-term memory limit of the linguistic and auditory processing areas of the brain, you expand the amount of information that audience members can process by utilizing visuals on your slides.

Putting This Research to Work

Both studies mentioned above suggest that meaningful visuals should be utilized in lieu of text-based explanations, when possible.

On that note, Dr. Atherton warns presenters not to use *Death by Powerpoint* (<https://blog.slideshare.net/2014/05/14/presentation-design-lessons-from-real-slides/>) clip art (<https://blog.slideshare.net/2014/05/14/presentation-design-lessons-from-real-slides/>). This study (http://sictet.org/journals/ijttl/issue1101/2_Berk.pdf), by Ronald A. Berk at The Johns Hopkins University, validates Dr. Atherton's wariness of clip art with its conclusion that *irrelevant pictures accompanying text and sound effects decrease learning*.



USE RELEVANT VISUALS

<https://blog.slideshare.net/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/Why-Bullet-Points-Are-Bad-Use-Relevant-Visuals.jpg>

If you cannot substitute visuals for your text, remove unnecessary words from your explanations to limit the reading you demand of your audience.



REDUCE TEXT

<https://blog.slideshare.net/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/Why-Bullet-Points-Are-Bad-Reduce-Text.jpg>

In addition, instead of listing multiple points on one slide using a bulleted list, give each point its own slide so your audience is not tempted to engage in mentally exhausting multitasking during your presentation.



ONE IDEA PER SLIDE

https://blog.slideshare.net/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/public-speaking-presentation-design-Why-Bullet-Points-Are-Bad_One-Idea-Per-Slide-3.jpg

Additional Resources:

[How to Turn Your Bullet Points Into Visually-Engaging Elements \(https://blog.slideshare.net/2015/05/05/redefining-your-bullet-points-turning-boring-into-visual/\)](https://blog.slideshare.net/2015/05/05/redefining-your-bullet-points-turning-boring-into-visual/)

[Slide Makeovers: Transforming PowerPoint Bullets Into Visual Learning \(https://blog.slideshare.net/2015/03/30/slide-makeovers-transforming-powerpoint-bullets-into-visual-learning/\)](https://blog.slideshare.net/2015/03/30/slide-makeovers-transforming-powerpoint-bullets-into-visual-learning/)

[Before & After: 4 Slide Makeover Tips \(https://blog.slideshare.net/2015/05/18/before-after-4-slide-makeover-tips/\)](https://blog.slideshare.net/2015/05/18/before-after-4-slide-makeover-tips/)

[Why Cognitive Load Theory Needs to be Applied to Every Presentation \(http://blog.slideshare.net/2014/03/03/cognitive-load-theory-and-your-presentation/\)](http://blog.slideshare.net/2014/03/03/cognitive-load-theory-and-your-presentation/)

[Minimize The Extraneous Load of Your Presentations \(http://www.ethos3.com/2015/01/how-to-minimize-the-extraneous-load-of-your-presentations/\)](http://www.ethos3.com/2015/01/how-to-minimize-the-extraneous-load-of-your-presentations/)

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