

Small Text Enhancements Can Make A Big Difference

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Creative Techniques

OK, you've got a beautiful background for your presentation. Maybe it's a subtle photomontage that hints at your presentation message or a bold graphic treatment with your logo in the corner. No matter how good it looks, though, a nice background is only one part of a great presentation. The text on top of that background is much more important to your audience. To help make your next presentation a success, try applying some of these typography basics.

Less text = more legibility

First, assess your current presentation. Project the slideshow on a screen and simulate the actual setup of your meeting. Dim the lights and sit in the back row of the room. Can you read every word that appears on your slides, including the chart labels? Is there enough contrast between the text and the background? Are you reading every word that appears on the screen?

One of the best ways to improve your presentation is to edit the amount of copy on each slide. I'm not going to tell you how many bullets to put on a slide or how many words to include in each bullet point. The general rule is that you should edit your copy down to the minimum number of words necessary to get your point across and fill in the rest while you are speaking. If a slide has too many bullets, break it into two slides. Minimize the number of elements in your charts. Less text means greater legibility and a cleaner-looking presentation.

Fonts have personality, too

As for the type itself, the fonts you choose can profoundly affect your message. Examine the text on your slides closely. Does it look too thin or too formal for your message? Fonts have personality, too; some are serious, some are bold, others are contemporary and clean. Legibility should be your priority. With the variety of fonts supplied with PowerPoint 2000 and Windows 98 or NT, you should have no problem choosing one or two that suit your presentation's personality.

If you choose an unusual TrueType font and are going to share the PowerPoint file, it's a good idea to embed the font before finalizing your design.

Tip: Click FILE > SAVE AS > TOOLS > EMBED TRUETYPE FONTS and save the file. (If PowerPoint 2000 won't embed the font, it will prompt you.)

Limit the number of fonts in your presentation to no more than three or four. Many terrific presentations are built with one font family; you can use the font's bold version for emphasis. Try a serif font for titles and a sans serif for text. Sans-serif fonts are the most legible in any size.

A little doctoring increases legibility <div align="center">Simply changing the font type and effects makes the slide's message more legible.

My first example shows a simple title slide with a colorful background image. The title uses the Times Roman default font and is centered -- not an original approach and not very legible from a distance. On the revised version, the font is 44-point Tahoma and the title is left justified. I placed a black, transparent rectangle behind the title for more contrast with the background. As an accent, a thin, gradient-filled rectangle sits at the top and bottom of the title area. The subtitle is right justified, 32-point Tahoma in light blue. All the text has been given a small, black drop-shadow. This solution is not dramatic, but the resulting text is much more legible than before. The changes establish a design theme that can be carried through the presentation.

Make subtle text enhancements <div align="center">Consistent type treatments can be applied to all kinds of slides, ensuring effective text.

The second example shows a standard text slide that uses the default text placeholders. The font is Times Roman with default white round bullets. The revision uses the same graphic elements created for the title slide: the black, transparent rectangle behind the title placeholder and the thin, gradient-filled rectangle under the title. The title font is Tahoma at a 44-point size and left-justified as in the title master slide. A small, black drop-shadow has been added, and the text anchor point is changed to BOTTOM.

Tip: Always make room for two-line titles while designing -- they're inevitable. Right-click on the title placeholder, click **FORMAT PLACEHOLDER > TEXT BOX** and change the text anchor point to **BOTTOM**. This allows any two-line titles to wrap upward.

The text font has changed to Tahoma at the same 32-point size, with a small, black drop-shadow and rectangular 80-percent purple bullets.

Tip: Right-click the text placeholder, click **BULLETS AND NUMBERING**, select the rectangular bullets, change the color and reset the percentage to 80.

Try Changing the Line Spacing

One of the easiest ways to improve your text's appearance is to change the line spacing on your placeholders. The goal is to visually separate each bulleted item from the others. Go to the slide master, hold down the shift key, click the text placeholder, click **FORMAT > LINE SPACING**. The text placeholder's default line spacing is one line. For a more tightly spaced line, you can change the spacing to 0.95 or 0.9 with most fonts. Don't go too small, though, or the ascenders and descenders of such letters as d, f, g and h will overlap.

You can change the amount of space before or after the paragraph as well. The default setting is 0.2 lines before a paragraph. I recommend a change to 0.4 or higher. Be careful not to space the lines so far apart that it looks as though something's missing. A little goes a long way in this case.

Simply put, to improve your next presentation, begin simplifying the text. If you make sure the audience can read what's on the screen, you're that much closer to getting your message across.