



# Where Charts and Graphs Learn to Sing

Edward Tufte's one-day course is well worth the investment for anyone whose presentations include complicated data.

His traveling seminar runs from 10:00 am to 4:00 pm, costs \$320 (which includes Tufte's 3 books), and future stops are posted on his website [www.edwardtufte.com](http://www.edwardtufte.com). Content runs the gamut from the grand principles of design right down to the nitty gritty of laying out an eye-catching home page. Along the way, Tufte offers enough wit and wisdom to keep you smiling




In January, I attended Ed Tufte's one-day seminar, "Presenting Data and Information," and I strongly recommend it to anyone who has ever agonized over a pie chart, bar graph, or other graphic that attempts to transform numbers into compelling visuals. For those not immediately familiar with the name, Tufte is a Professor Emeritus at Yale University and is widely acknowledged as one of the deans of information design.

and writing down all the well-worded nuggets you won't want to forget. (My personal favorite is Tufte's three-word prescription for improving any presentation: "Get better content.") ■

**When was the last time you saw a good presentation?**

That's just one of the questions posed in our online survey, and if you haven't taken it yet, please go to <http://surveys.edgeresearch.com/goodman/andylogn.htm> complete the questionnaire, and reserve your copy of *Why Bad Presentations Happen to Good Causes*.

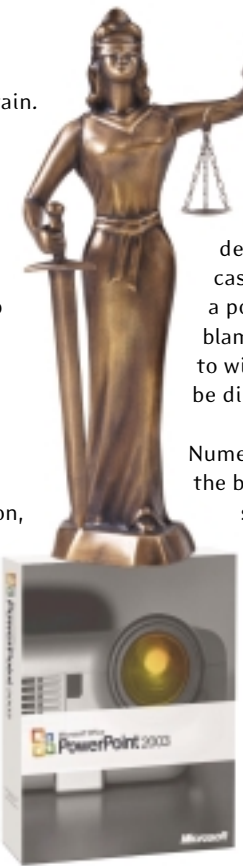


# The People v. PowerPoint

Another innocent audience has just been riddled with bullets, their attention and interest snuffed out by a deadly PowerPoint presentation. But is the ubiquitous slideware entirely to blame?

No question about it: PowerPoint was a bargain. First developed under the name "Presenter" by a company called Forethought, the program and its parent were both acquired by Microsoft in 1987 for \$14 million – chump change for Bill Gates, and a steal considering subsequent sales that have landed PowerPoint on an estimated 400 million computers worldwide.

What remains an open question, though, is whether or not using PowerPoint is a bargain with the devil. When presenters turn their material over to the AutoContent Wizard – cookie-cutter software that spits out endless slides with bullets, clip



art, and colorful backgrounds—are they condemning their presentation and whoever sees it to a slow and painful death? Or is this actually a case of mistaken identity where a poorly used (but essentially blameless) tool has been subjected to withering criticism that should be directed elsewhere?

Numerous experts from academia, the business community, and other sectors have already weighed in on this question, and some of their most lucid comments have been gathered in this issue to concisely present the case for and against PowerPoint. So, dear reader, please rise: the Supremely Bored People's Court is now in session. ►

► *Witnesses for the Prosecution*

**Edward Tufte, Professor Emeritus, Yale University**

“In a business setting, a PowerPoint slide typically shows 40 words, which is about eight seconds’ worth of silent reading material. With so little information per slide, many, many slides are needed. Audiences consequently endure a relentless sequentiality, one damn slide after another. When information is stacked in time, it is difficult to understand context and evaluate relationships. Visual reasoning usually works more effectively when relevant information is shown side by side.”

—from “PowerPoint is Evil,” by Edward Tufte (*Wired*, Sept. 2003)

**Todd Parker, English Professor, DePaul University**

“My biggest complaint is that [the slides] come between the teacher and his or her students. The danger is that class tends to devolve into a slide show from which

students too often retreat to that room behind their eyeballs. My seven years at DePaul have taught me that the most valuable relationship between teacher and student is charismatic and immediate, one in which the teacher actively engages the students personally. This is hard to do when you turn the effort of instruction over to a machine.”

—from “Killing Me Microsoftly with PowerPoint,” by Julia Keller (*Chicago Tribune*, January 5, 2003)

**Cathleen Belleville, PowerPoint product planner, 1989-1995**

“I think that we as a people have become unaccustomed to having real conversations with each other, where we actually give and take to arrive at a new answer. We present to each other, instead of discussing.”

—from “Absolute PowerPoint”, by Ian Parker (*The New Yorker*, May 28, 2001)

**Sherry Turkle, author, *The Second Self: Computers and the Human Spirit***

“[PowerPoint] is one element among others that keep us from complexity. We face a very complex world. History is quite complex. Current events and literature are complex. Students are thinking and doing presentations on complicated things, and we need them to be able to think about them in complicated ways. PowerPoint is not a step in the right direction.”

—from “Killing Me Microsoftly with PowerPoint,” by Julia Keller (*Chicago Tribune*, January 5, 2000)

*Witnesses for the Defense*

**Neville Holmes, Honorary Research Associate, University of Tasmania School of Computing**

“Bullet points—PowerPoint’s most vilified aspect—are the most misunderstood of presentation techniques. As far as the audience is concerned, bullet points only serve to remind them of the presentation’s general context. As far as the presenter is concerned, bullet points replace the mnemonic techniques handed down from the Greeks and the more recent prompt cards hidden in the hand of a formal debater.”

—from “In Defense of PowerPoint,” by Neville Holmes (*Computer on-line magazine*, July 2004)

**Seth Godin, author, entrepreneur, and self-described “agent of change”**

“PowerPoint presents an amazing opportunity. You can use the screen to talk emotionally to the audience’s right brain (through their eyes), and your words can go through the audience’s ears to talk to their left brain. That’s what Steven Spielberg does. It seems to work for him.”

—from *Really Bad PowerPoint (and how to avoid it)*, e-book by Seth Godin

**David Byrne, former Talking Head**

“Software constraints are only confining if you use them for what they’re intended to be used for. PowerPoint may not be of any use for you in a presentation, but it may liberate you in another way, an artistic way. Who knows?”

—from “Does PowerPoint Make Us Stupid?” (*Associated Press*, December 30, 2003)

**Howard Gardner, Professor of Cognition and Education, Harvard University Graduate School of Education**

“I certainly don’t think that it stifles creativity, and might even stimulate it if the technology is used imaginatively and synergistically with other paraphernalia. Like any other technology, it can be over-used and distorted. [But] PowerPoint is itself quite flexible, and so there is no need for it to simplify or oversimplify students’ presentations. If a student falls into a bad habit or uses it in a rigid fashion, teachers should give helpful feedback, just as if a student always wrote a paper in exactly the same way.”

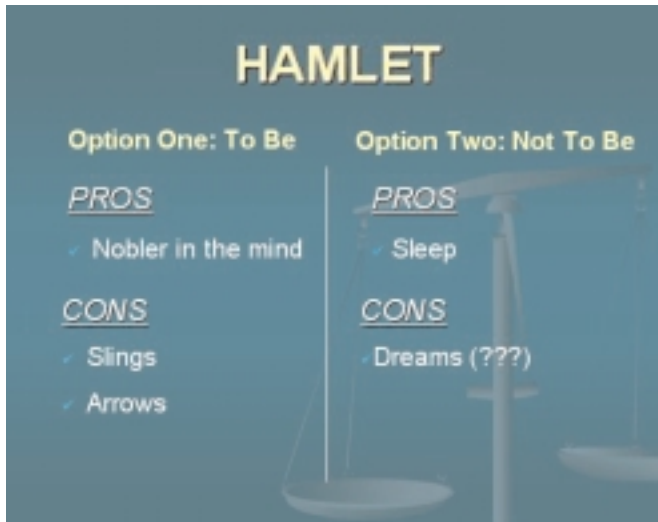
—from “Killing Me Microsoftly with PowerPoint,” by Julia Keller (*Chicago Tribune*, January 5, 2003)

*The Verdict*

Unintentionally rendered by Adam Hanft, columnist for Inc. Magazine, in his August 2003 column entitled, “More Power Than Point”:

“For all the demonizing, PowerPoint is just a tool. And we should all know by now that tools are like messengers: They shouldn’t be shot, they should be feted because they tell us something about what’s going on beyond our headquarters’ camp. And what is going on? Why has PowerPoint become so popular? It’s probably closer to the truth to see PowerPoint as the symptom of a deeper disease, a syndrome marked by a shortage of reflection and insufficient critical thinking.”

Or, to paraphrase Shakespeare: the fault, dear reader, is not in our slides, but in ourselves. ■



What if Shakespeare used PowerPoint? A speculation by Daniel Radosh.

