workshop

Slideshow attraction

Presentations can get your point across fast, spark an interesting discussion and help everyone make a decision. But a poorly executed presentation can put the audience to sleep and make you seem unprofessional. Mary Branscombe provides a few simple rules to help you make the right impact

Creating a presentation is easy: choose a standard style, type in your ideas as bullet points and add a few sound effects. While this method of slideshow creation is pretty foolproof and requires little planning or design skills, needless to say it almost certainly won't result in the most memorable presentation, which somewhat defeats the point of standing up in front of an audience in the first place.

Surely the idea is to distinguish your ideas from the dozens of other so-so presentations your clients have already seen. You don't have to stick with blue backgrounds and cheesy animations –

and presentations don't need to be loaded with multimedia to be interesting.

The key is knowing your audience and subject. If you choose wisely, graphics, animations and layout will reinforce what you have to say. If you're unsure what your message is to start with then multimedia will just overwhelm the presentation.
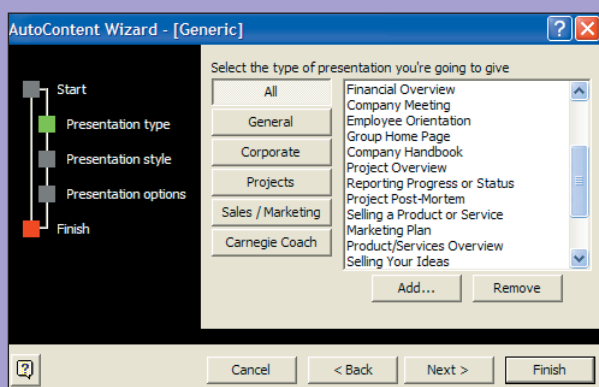
A way with words

You can set up a slideshow in most presentation packages by choosing a design and then selecting slide layouts. However, it's better to start creating the content in a word processor or in Outline View because that makes you concentrate

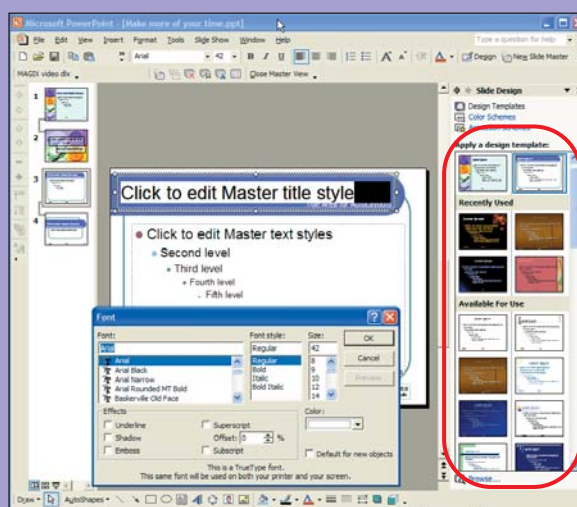ILLUSTRATION: AILEEN O'DONNELL

Using PowerPoint's templates

Microsoft PowerPoint gives you plenty of help with creating and presenting slides. However, don't be afraid to change the default templates if they don't suit the way you want to express your ideas.

A good starting point is PowerPoint's AutoContent Wizard which asks a few questions about the sort of slideshow you want to create and then provides a structure for you to work on and edit as you see fit.

You can switch between Outline View and slideshow thumbnails using the View drop-down menu. In PowerPoint 2002 tabs for both views are provided to the left of the working area while the Task Pane to the right shows thumbnails of possible designs, multimedia elements or colour schemes, depending on which submenu you've selected from the drop-down list. If you're not using PowerPoint 2002, you can access these layout elements from the main toolbar.

1 To access the AutoContent Wizard in PowerPoint 2002, go to File, New or View, Task Pane and click on From AutoContent Wizard. In older versions of PowerPoint a pane with these options may launch automatically; if not, choose it under File, New and choose AutoContent Wizard in the Presentations tab and then select the options most applicable to the type of slideshow you want to create. When you're happy with your selection, click Finish and a sample slideshow will be displayed in Outline View. You can then edit it as you wish by clicking on the text and multimedia boxes

2 Chances are, the default design PowerPoint has used will need some tweaking. Browse the templates in the Task Pane in PowerPoint 2002 to find a layout you like, click to select and apply it. In older software versions, choose Insert, New Slide and select from the templates provided or Duplicate Slide to copy an existing layout. Use View, Master, Slide Master to change the design for all your slides

on developing what you want to say, rather than how the slides look.

You need an opening slide that grabs the audience's attention but, unless you have a good idea, don't start there. Instead, start with the final slide: this will probably stay onscreen while you move on to a discussion, so it needs to be a clear summary that reinforces the important points. And once you know where the presentation is heading it's much easier to build towards the conclusion. Don't be afraid of repetition: it helps the key ideas stick in people's minds.

Work on the flow of the presentation from slide to slide. Get your ideas in a logical order before you concentrate on the slide layout. You need to introduce your topic, describe the problem, explain your solution and then give action points. Use the notes field to jot down examples and anecdotes – they'll give you something more to say than just reading out the slide.

Slide rules

Most presentation packages will automatically create slides as you type, ready to apply designs and layouts. Check it's not cramming too many points on to a single slide: around five bullets per slide is ideal. If you have a lot of backup data, don't try and fit it all onscreen: create accompanying handouts. If you're printing slides containing complex animations, remember only the final view prints out: if a diagram has multiple stages, include the intermediate steps on the handouts. And check your colours for printing. Shades that contrast onscreen can come out as the same grey on paper.

Avoid a blue background as it won't make your presentation stand out from the crowd. With modern screens and projectors other colours are perfectly legible. Pick a patterned background or a picture to add interest, but make sure there's a plain area behind your text.

Your text colour needs to contrast with the background and be large enough to read from a distance: if the audience is sitting 12 feet away rather than six, your text needs to be twice as large to be legible. Be wary of combining red and green, brown and green, blue and black or blue and purple: someone who's colour-blind won't see the difference. Remember that unless the room is dark, your colours won't look as bright from a distance as they do when you're sitting right in front of the monitor. And whether you're using red,

Formatting slides
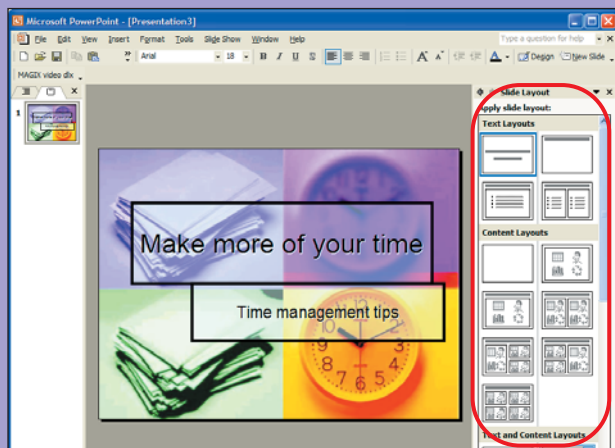
1 Add new slides or change the current layout from the Slide Layout pane, which will either be shown down the righthand side of the screen or can be accessed from the View menu. You can see your current slide plus notes and either thumbnails of the slideshow or the text outline of your presentation. This lets you see how it fits together, making it easier to pick the most suitable layout
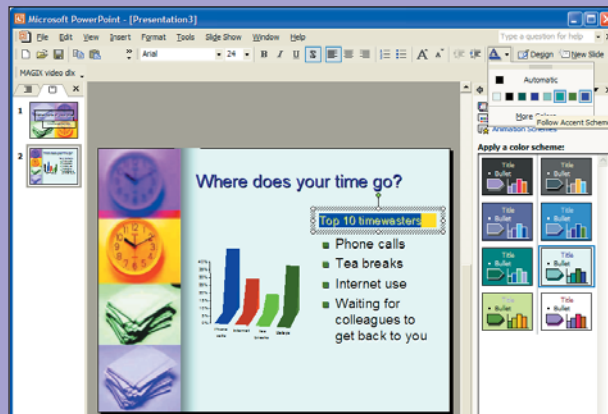
2 PowerPoint's preset colour combinations (under Slide Design, Color Schemes in the Task Pane) are designed to work well together. You can override these colours by choosing the A icon on the main toolbar and selecting the More Colors option. We added a Top 10 headline text box using the Insert, Text box option and chose a custom colour for emphasis. In PowerPoint 97 or 98, choose Format, Slide Color Scheme and select Custom

Adding impact with images
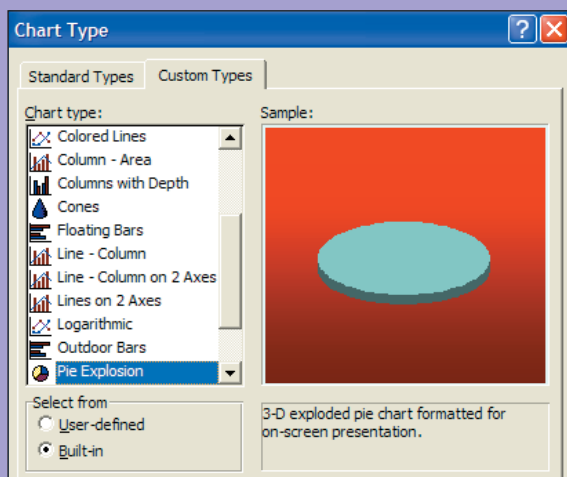
1 In PowerPoint 2002, clip art, animations and charts can all be added by double-clicking the icon on the slide and choosing from PowerPoint's library or browsing to an image of your own. Double-click to bring up Custom Types for charts. In earlier versions, choose Insert, Chart and right-click to get Standard or Custom chart types. If you create your own style, save it into the Custom charts menu — that way you'll be able to reuse it for consistency
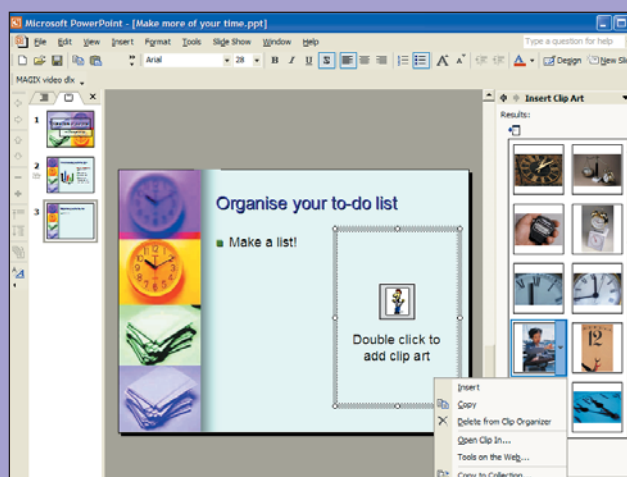
2 Clip art and other images such as your company logo can be added to your presentation in the same way as with charts. If you choose the right image it will really help get your point across. You can search PowerPoint's Clip Organizer image library by keyword or style, add your own graphics and import others from the Clip Gallery on the software CD. Right-click the slide where you want the image to appear and choose Insert

italics or underlining to emphasise a word or point, use it sparingly for best effect.

Consider the hierarchy of each slide: decide what you particularly want to

stand out and emphasise that. For a professional look, be consistent. Use no more than three font sizes and stick to the same typeface throughout.

Software options
Although PowerPoint is synonymous with presentations, it's not the only software you can use: all the office suites come

Reordering slides and their content
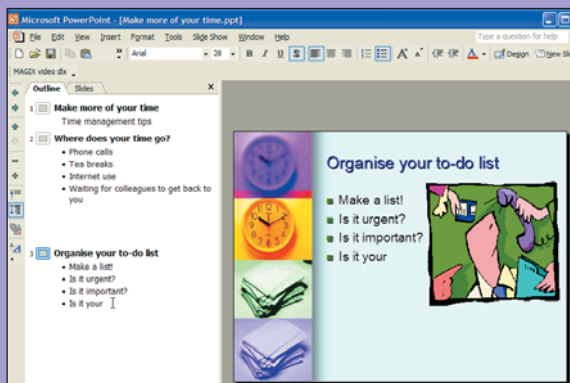
1 Even if you don't create your presentation in Outline View, use it to check how your presentation flows. You can easily move points between slides by dragging them up or down within the slides in the lefthand pane. Turn on Show Formatting (under View, Toolbars) and you'll be able to check fonts and the consistency of your design, too
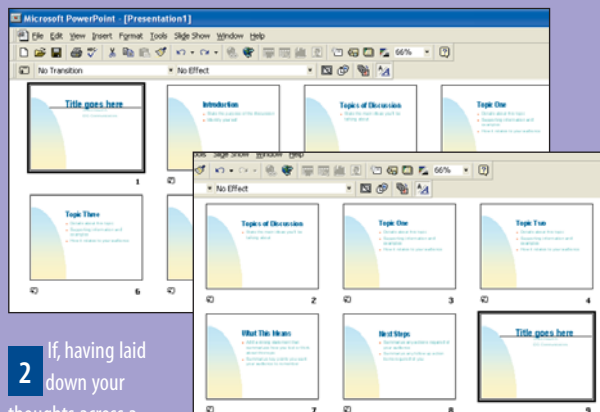

2 If, having laid down your thoughts across a number of slides, you find some points should have a higher priority than others, you can easily alter the slide sequence by switching to the Slide Sorter view (a drop-down menu option in the Task Pane; accessible under the View menu for those not using PowerPoint 2002) and dragging and dropping slides into a more logical order

Adding animations
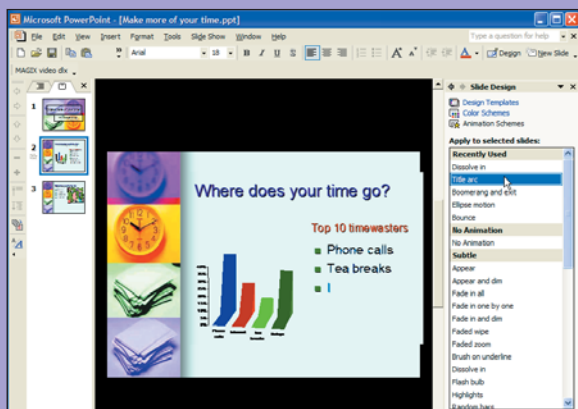
1 So far, your presentation is static, but you can change this using different types of transition between slides. PowerPoint calls these animations. Choose a subtle animation scheme from PowerPoint 2002's Task Pane or from Slide Show, Custom Animation in previous copies of PowerPoint. Then use the drop-down menus to select and preview possible slide transitions
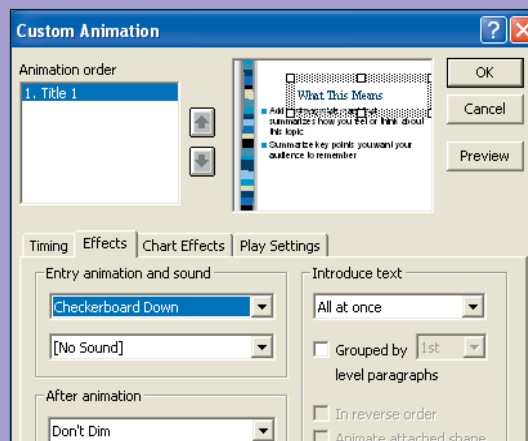
2 You want your audience to think about the words onscreen rather than watching exciting transitions and missing the points you're trying to make. Choose the type of animation you want and preview it to ensure it doesn't appear too clever for its own good. Stick to one or two types of transition and you'll keep audience attention without confusing them

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with a presentation package. Lotus Freelance isn't the most powerful or comprehensive, but it's very simple to use. There are plenty of SmartMaster templates to get you started, some with built-in multimedia. Irritatingly, they're not organised into categories and the clip art isn't impressive.

Corel Presentations, on the hand, has excellent graphics – a complete set of drawing tools, including a Bezier curve editor and image editing – plus many of WordPerfect's tools for working with text.

If you need multiple versions of one presentation you can keep them in one file (Microsoft PowerPoint calls this a custom show). You can create PDF files – ideal for distributing a presentation that you don't want copied or changed – or a Flash movie. Even with extra features in the latest version, Presentations is more of a drawing package than a business tool: Freelance and PowerPoint still outclass it on the presentation side.

As well as being widely available (which is handy if you need to make last-minute changes to a presentation when you're away from your PC), PowerPoint has the most powerful tools for building presentations. The Taskbars work particularly well in PowerPoint 2002: the Slide Design Task Pane and the New Slide Task Pane make it easy to see how the options for the layout and look of slides fit with your presentation.

Major new features in PowerPoint 2002 include AutoSave, print preview (sensibly in black and white unless you've selected a colour printer) and being able to have two Slide Master designs in one presentation (if you want a different look for different sections of a presentation or need to combine two presentations). You can alter the resolution of images to keep the file size down and the diagram tool replaces the limited and irritating org chart applet with real diagramming tools; editing charts is still a little awkward, though.

Make a display of yourself

It's not just about creating your slides. PowerPoint also helps the most when you're running your presentation: it automatically switches off screensavers and screen-blanking power-management features, hides the mouse pointer when it hasn't been moved for a while and reduces the sensitivity of the mouse so it doesn't reappear if you knock it.

Try to use a second screen so you can see the presentation yourself. If you plug your laptop into an external monitor you can see a set of presenter tools on one screen while the presentation runs full-screen on the other. This allows you to see your notes, get a preview of the next bullet or slide and jump straight to any slide without having to flip back and forth. Otherwise, right-click for navigation tools.

If you're brain-storming rather than presenting a solution that's already been worked out, people will want to make suggestions. Rather than writing or drawing on a flipchart and copying it down later, you could invest in an interactive whiteboard. These either print out a copy of what you've drawn or, more usefully, save it as a file on to your computer. Some can even record sound so you can play back the discussion later. Kits that you can attach to an existing whiteboard are cheaper, but a fully electronic whiteboard may let you display your presentation so you can annotate it.

Dummy run

If you're working with a projector, have a laser pointer to hand so that you can indicate specific areas of the screen to illustrate your points. Alternatively, take an infrared mouse or a presentation controller with an extra-long lead so you can walk around, make gestures and interact with the audience without being bent over the laptop keyboard. If you're stuck behind the computer looking down at the screen, the audience may feel you're not properly prepared or find it difficult to talk to you.

Try and get to the room early – it will give you time to check the hardware, make sure you can get connected and rectify any last minute hitches. If nothing goes wrong, it also gives you time to welcome people as they arrive and get an idea of the audience before you start. If you're taking your own projector, bring a spare bulb, an extra set of cables and a cloth for handling the bulb in case you need to change it while it's hot.

Finally, think about the room layout: if there isn't a fixed projector, make sure any power leads are plugged in to the socket furthest from the door so latecomers don't trip over them. Draw the blinds or position the screen so it's not washed out by direct sunlight. At the end of the day, what's most important is creating a comfortable environment so your presentation can make the impact it deserves. ■

Presenting your slideshow
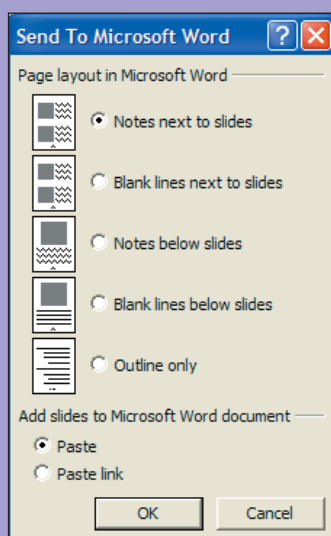
1 The Notes field has basic word-processing features like AutoCorrect and spellchecking but for more control over the look of your handout and to add information that's hard to deal with in such a small dialog box, choose File, Send To, Microsoft Word and edit your handouts as Word documents
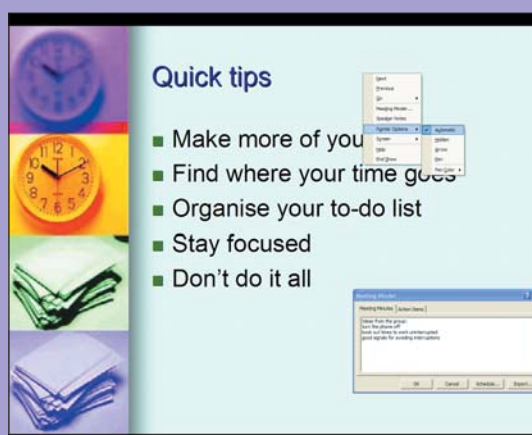
2 When you're running your slideshow, clicking with the mouse takes you to the next bullet point or screen; to select a different slide, right-click and choose Go to jump forward, back or pick a slide by name. You can show or hide the cursor, open Meeting Minder to take notes, see your speaker notes or quickly turn the screen off