Chapter 9

Avoiding Handout Hell

The height of my client-visiting season is March through August when I visit or connect remotely with dozens of client sites and meet with potentially many hundreds of people. Almost to a person, the following two statements hold true:

- The biggest issue that presentation designers and content creators face is placing too much text on a slide.

- The primary reason that people do this is because they are asking their slides to function both as the visual for the presentation and as the printed leave-behind or handout.

The frequency with which this strategy fails is breathtaking. In fact, for the sake of round numbers, let’s just call it 100%. Yes, this will fail every time you attempt it. And you, in turn, would become an epic failure for attempting it.

That would be bad, so keep reading…
What You Give

Recall back to Chapter 7 and our discussion of the three key qualities of a presentation: what you say, what you show, and what you give. Your ideal scenario is to make each of those three experiences as effective and as impactful as possible for your audiences. You want your words to resonate, your visuals to complement your story, and your handout to provide valuable detail.

As we noted previously, however, too often they all become the same thing: you place all those words on a slide, you then feel compelled to read them aloud, your audiences receive printouts of slides that recite this same story, and your presentation is deemed something less than a success.

Let’s make this really simple for you: don’t do this anymore! Do not design slides as if they are handouts. Do not print your slides and call them handouts. Do not write speeches and project them because you think they will make good handouts. Do not do these things.

Separation anxiety

Figure 9.1 shows a typical collection of slides from my client files, these from the giant insurance provider Prudential Financial. Prudential’s outside sales people have beefy narratives to share about the value of the company’s insurance packages, and indeed, these folks did many things right with their pitches to prospective customers. In particular, they:

1. Identified their key message.
2. Knew how to strengthen their argument with compelling facts and anecdotes.
3. Found lots of supporting facts.
4. Created a leave-behind that told their story.

They did all those things right and they did just one thing wrong, but that one wrong thing torpedoed their entire effort. You already know the punchline here: they tried to do all of these things on their slides.

The three slides at right are jam-packed with information, not because Prudential’s creative team thought that was the best way to create slides, but because busy slides seemed like the best compromise for handling the needs in the room with the needs of providing a printed takeaway. Based on everything we have talked about in the preceding 55 pages, you can imagine what kind of reception they got. This is right about the time that they called me in for a consultation.
Figure 9.1
These slides are typical of attempts made by well-intentioned content creators who think that they can create effective slides for visual and printed content. That fails every time.
The twain shall never meet

In nearly two decades spent as a presentation consultant, I have not once seen a slide deck that successfully functions as both compelling visual content and informative written material. Not once.

There is just no getting around it: if you create slides for your presentation that follow the ideas laid forth in this book—or the ones authored by Garr Reynolds, Nancy Duarte, Cliff Atkinson, or many others—those slides will necessarily fail as a printed leave behind. And if you create slides that contain fleshed-out thoughts for audience members to review afterward, you create instant Death by PowerPoint when you project them.

These two purposes are hopelessly disparate—the twain shall never meet. And yet you are likely one of tens of thousands who attempt it on a weekly or maybe even daily basis.

I’m both mindful of and sympathetic to the demands that are placed on presentation designers and creators in today’s workforce. Nonetheless, I am compelled to tell you that you must create two documents in order to do this right. I understand the specter of what I’m saying here, as I know all about 11th hour crises, crazed bosses, ridiculous deadlines, and the like. But that doesn’t change my advice; in fact, it just makes me more strident: if you work long hours on presentation content, it becomes even more important that you be doing something that you like and that you’re good at. But nobody likes creating double-duty slides, nobody is any good at it, it’s impossible to do right, and audiences usually loathe them.

Rx for the Handout Blues

I want to assuage your pain somewhat by showing you a technique within PowerPoint that can at least enable you to create both types of content within one PowerPoint file. The following procedure is brought to you by Microsoft’s persistent failure to provide an intelligent handout engine within the software, requiring those of us in the trenches to invent workarounds. What follows is my preferred one.

Introducing the Notes Master

The chances are pretty good that you know about PowerPoint’s Slide Master, where you control the global look and feel of your slide deck. The other assumption I will make here is that you know about the Notes page, where you can jot down any ideas or thoughts as you create your content.

Odds are pretty good that you know about those two parts of the software, yet odds are equally good that you have never had occasion to visit the Notes Master, where you can control the global look and feel of your deck's
Notes pages. Most people just accept the default of a slide thumbnail that consumes the top half of the page and a text box that resides on the lower half.

In fact, you can design the Notes Master as robustly as you can any slide, and therein lies the secret sauce to this solution:

I want you to use your notes pages to create a dedicated handout for your presentations.

The Notes Master has been in the software since forever, but very few people have had occasion to use it. Figure 9.2 shows the result of 10 minutes spent with it. You are creating a custom design just for printed handouts.

Figure 9.2
By redesigning the Notes Master, you can create a custom format for creating handouts.

Download handouts.pptx and switch to the Notes Master to see this for yourself.
Anything you can place on a slide, you can also place on the Notes Master. (The only things not available are animation and hyperlinks, as the medium is static.) Here are several things worth pointing out about the elements on this redesigned Notes Master, going clockwise from the top:

- The header is a simple rectangle placed behind white text.
- The Prudential logo is a transparent PNG file, allowing it to sit atop the black header.
- The slide thumbnail is much smaller than the default size that spans nearly the entire width of the page. For that matter, you get to decide whether you want it at all. It’s often helpful for a printed handout to connect back with content during a live presentation, but that’s your call.
- There is a page number at bottom-left. I am rarely in favor of placing numbers on a slide, but page numbers for a printed piece are different.
- And finally, note the amount of real estate given to text and also the simple (and small-sized) format for it. Just three levels, all under 12pt.

In just about every way, this is going to function better as a template for handouts than the slide ever could. All of the elements are more appropriately sized (who among us needs 18- and 24-point text on a handout??) and there is plenty of room for the volumes of text that you can now accommodate. Just the fact that Notes pages can be printed portrait is a point in its favor, as most people prefer to hold printouts in their hands that are taller than they are wide.

**Moving day**

Now that we have a place to put all of that excess text, let’s take out the trash-, um, that is, let’s find a better home for it. All three of the slides shown in Figure 9.1 are good candidates for this exchange, and it can be as simple as a copy and paste maneuver from the slide to the Notes page.

Compare the finished results on the next page with the original slides in Figure 9.1. In creating both slides and handouts, you produce a presentation package that speaks well of your sensibilities. You tell your audience that you get it, that you understand the way they would like to receive information. That they don’t want to drown in text when they are trying to listen to you, but that they appreciate being given all of the details so they can read it themselves later. This helps create bonds of trust between you and your audience members that run deeper than what you can muster by simply standing in front of a room, speaking, and shoving text in front of their eyes. You’re different than most presenters and they recognize that.
One major caveat: the Notes master does not travel in a template or theme file as the Slide master does. The only way to recycle a Notes master is to treat the PPTX file itself as a template and copy it. We’re still waiting for Microsoft to provide us with a true handout engine that lives within its templating system.
A Whole New Routine For You

As soon as you separate the tasks of making slides and handouts, you deliver yourself from the impossible assignment of double-duty slides and you give yourself an opportunity to think like an effective presentation designer. Here is what you can ask of yourself or of your team:

- What elements do I need to create the best possible visual to complement our story? What are the two or three key points for this slide?

- Now, let me gather up all of the details and the research that my audience would appreciate reading afterward.

You will become so much better at both of these tasks and your work will become more rewarding. You will no longer be frustrated by the pressures to place more and more text on your slides, and you will no longer frustrate those who want you to place even more when you feel like you’re already using too much. Your handouts can now accommodate all of it.

Thanks to this process, you will become a better storyteller and presenter and will distinguish yourself from 99% of the people giving business presentations today.

Composer or doodler?

In my workshops, I ask people to identify the more important skills for presentation: composing fully-formed thoughts or sketching and doodling. Answers vary depending upon our location (I don’t get many doodlers in Silicon Valley), but irrespective, I surprise everyone when I say that it does not matter. It doesn’t matter which you think you are, and it doesn’t matter which you do first, because you’re going to have to do both.

These are questions of your personality and it would be arrogant for me to presume that one thought process is superior to another. If you are more comfortable fleshing out your ideas in fully-formed thoughts and sentences, then you should start on the Notes page and create the handout first. On the other hand, if your creative juices flow out of your noodling on big-picture ideas, you should create your slides first, with tightly-honed text, and then flesh out the handout.

It’s almost scary how close to a panacea this is. I don’t use the word “literally” lightly: if PowerPoint users stopped the practice of creating double-duty slides, it would literally eliminate at least 75% of all incidents of Death by PowerPoint.

So I put it to you: Do you want to make the world a better place? If you create slides that you then print as handouts, stop doing that!