# Effect of notecard restrictions on student presentations

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**ABSTRACT**

Student presentations are an integral part of many business course curricula. PowerPoint™ and other presentation slideware offerings create opportunities for students to create text laden slides which are used as Teleprompters by less than fully-prepared presenters. Numerous prescriptions have been proposed for remedying text laden presentation slides. However, literature searches identify a paucity of research addressing the transfer of text from slides to notes when text restrictions are applied to students' presentation slides.

This article addresses the impact on student perceptions of their preparation and presentation quality when text limitations are applied to both slides and speaker notes. It summarizes the thoughts and recommendations concerning multimedia presentations from a cross section of communications academics, practitioners and designers. The authors then present findings from a descriptive survey addressing student perceptions of their in-class presentations when stringent text restrictions are imposed on both visuals and notecards for a final presentation in a college of business capstone management course.

Keywords: PowerPoint™, Multimedia Presentations, Notecards, Students, Slides, Communications

## INTRODUCTION

Mastering course content is usually the principal purpose of a course. However, improving communication skills, both oral and written is often an important secondary objective. Many faculty members require students to make oral presentations at least once during a semester. Depending on the course, the presentation may be short and simple, or relatively long and detailed, especially for a case analysis, as an example. In one of the authors' classes, students make three presentations ranging from 20 to 50 minutes. PowerPoint™ or some other form of slideware is always used and frequently students also rely on note cards. The authors have observed considerable variability in the quality of these presentations. This article assesses the effect of one approach to encouraging students to make more effective presentations – imposed limitations on slide composition and number of words per note card.

## BACKGROUND

### "Death by PowerPoint"

Based on several references, Cyphert concludes from his literature search that "Business practitioners universally agree that a speaker should be the focus of a presentation" (Cyphert, 2007, p 182). Experience suggests that many business persons, academics and students have become all-to-familiar with multimedia presentations consisting of text laden slide after text laden slide read to the audience by a less than fully prepared presenter. The PowerPoint software facilitates, if not encourages, outline-style presentations with multiline headlines and deep levels of bulleted and sub-bulleted text in continually decreasing font sizes.

The authors' experiences suggest that when preparing a presentation many students (and faculty and business persons) tend to dive slide-first into the process without formulating their message and organizing their presentation narrative. This process places counterproductive emphasis on slides rather than message. It frequently creates a presentation where audience members become focused on the slides. They multitask between reading the slides and listening to the presenter. This may result in frustration with the presenter's inability to speak as quickly as the audience can read the slides. The process alienates audiences and detracts from the messages (Gareis, 2007). These text-rich slides have been found to distract viewers rather than enhance knowledge transfer (Pratt, 2003). Durate suggests that presentations tend to fall along a continuum from document (more than 75 words per slide) to Teleprompter (50 or so words per slide) to presentations where slides are effectively used as visual aids reinforcing the presenter's message (Durate, 2008). Document and teleprompter slides often serve as a "visual crutch" (Durate, 2008, p 261) for the presenter rather than a comprehension enhancement tool for the audience.

### Elements of Effective Presentations

Durate posits the "presentation ecosystem" (Durate, 2008, 11) consisting of three parts – the message, the visual story and the delivery. Duarte and other authorities (Reynolds 2011, 2012; Cyphert, 2007; Lahtonen, 2011) recommend that presentation preparation begin with specification of the message. Next the points to be made in support of the message are outlined (Durate, 2008; Cyphert 2007). Narratives or stories are more effective in communicating

knowledge than are a series of outlined arguments (Cyphert, 2007). "One of the components for creating sticking messages is story" (Reynolds, 2012, p 77). The outlined points are incorporated into the narrative which is the oral portion of the presentation.

The second element of Duarte's presentation ecosystem is the visual story. These are the slides that support the oral story (Pratt, 2003; Mahin, 2004) by providing context for the story's content (Lehtonen, 2011). The slides are secondary to the oral story. Their supporting role must not distract from the oral story. Several limitations have been recommended for restraining the impact of presentation slides. The three second rule (Durate, 2008) equates presentation slides to outdoor billboards and dictates that each slide's message be limited to the amount of information that can be processed by audience members within three seconds. Variations on the 1-7-7 rule (Reynolds, 2012; Durate, 2008; Katt et. al., 2008) limit each slide to one main idea, a maximum of seven lines of text and a maximum of seven words per line. Katt et. al. suggest that the 1-7-7 and similar text limitation rules are based on Miller's conclusion that short term memory can only process about seven chunks of information and simultaneously discriminate among about seven stimuli (Miller, 1956). Pecha Kucha (Lehtonen, 2012; Reynolds, 2012; Durate, 2008) is a rigid presentation format involving 20 slides each shown for 20 seconds creating a 6-minute 40-second presentation. The 10/20/30 Rule is a rigid format employed by a venture capital firm which limits PowerPoint presentations to 10 slides presented in 20 minutes with no font smaller than 30 points (Durate, 2008). Reynolds (2012) suggests that the number of slides should be a function of the core point to be made, the purpose of the talk, the audience and their expectations, the desired outcome and the nature of the venue. Reynolds (2012) and Durate (2008) recommend eliminating bullet points from presentation slides.

Delivery is the third element in Durate's presentation ecosystem. "The bulk of a presentation comes not from the slides but from the depth and breadth of the presenter's extemporaneous discussion of the topic during the presentation" (Mahin, 2004 p 221). Practice is the corner stone of effective presentation delivery (Durate, 2008; Reynolds, 2011; Berkin, 2010). The goal of practice is to find a point of preparedness that makes the presenter confident and fluent, but does not destroy spontaneity. Reynolds, (2011) equates a good presentation to a jazz performance.

Many communications authors recommend some system of prompts other than the slides. Renfrow and Impars (1989) recommend notecards used as cues or guides. Each card presents an idea with highlighted key words. They are to be "glanced at – not read from" (p 21). Durate (2008) recommends flash cards, mind maps or a written summary. Reynolds suggests a "single page of easy-to-see notes" (2011, p 54) or a one-page list of key points in large type should the technology fail.

**METHOD**

**Limit Slide and Notecard Content**

Students in a College of Business capstone management course were instructed not to use bulleted slides, nor were they to have more than seven words on a slide. The slides are intended to add interest and emphasis but not substitute for the oral portion of the talk. The result of these requirements was that students added detail to their notecards and, too often, read the notecards to the audience. Their visuals had improved but the overall presentations had not.

After suffering through many readings of presentations one of the authors thought the reading of notecards could be eliminated if, instead of simply eliminating the cards, the cards were limited to only enough information to "jog" the speaker's memory. Therefore, for the third, and final, presentation of the semester, notecards were limited to no more than three words. Violators, if discovered could have their entire deck of cards taken away.

The professor members hoped (anticipated) the overall quality of the talks would improve with better eye contact and a more conversational presentation. The quality improvement would be the result of more time spent preparing and practicing the presentation.

Students were asked to do a self-analysis of the degree to which they followed the three-word requirement and any perceived change in preparation and quality of the presentation. A copy of the questionnaire is presented in the Appendix.

## FINDINGS

The majority of students followed the professor's instruction (Figure 1). More than three-fifths (61%) of students report following the professor's instruction to limit the number of words per presentation notecard to three. Another 29% of the students report "usually" following the instruction. Only 10% of students report not following the instruction.

### Improved Presentations

Limiting the number of words per notecard to three contributes to better presentations (Figure 2). More than four-fifths (85%) of students who report following the instruction perceive their presentations to be at least "slightly better". More than three-fifths (63%) of the students who followed the instruction report their presentations have been "much better".

### Increased Preparation and Practice Time

Restricting notes to three words per card is associated with additional presentation preparation time (Figure 3). Nearly four-fifths (78%) of all students report spending "slightly" (61%) or "considerably" (17%) more time preparing for their presentation. More than three-fifths (61%) of students reporting they followed directions report spending "slightly more time preparing". The amount of time spent preparing for a presentation is directly correlated with the student's perception of the quality of the presentation at the .02 level of statistical significance.
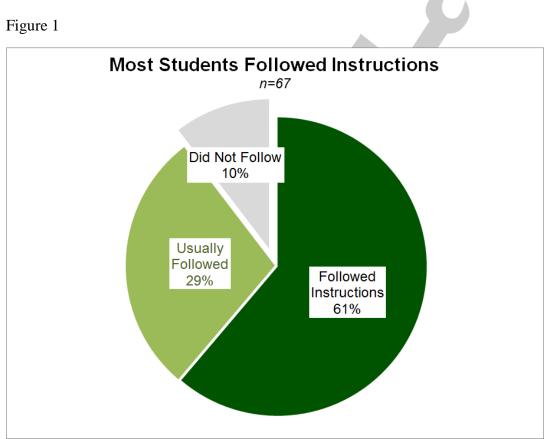
The restriction does not appear to require more than a few additional notecards for a presentation (Figure 4). Nearly three-fourths (73%) of the students who followed directions report requiring no more than a few additional note cards. More than two-fifths (43%) of these students report requiring no additional notecards.

Three words per card is associated with additional practice time (Figure 5). Nearly four-fifths (78%) of students using the three-word-per-card limit report requiring at least "slightly" more time for practicing their presentations. The amount of time required for practice is directly correlated with the amount of time required for preparing the presentation at the .000 level of two-tailed statistical significance.

## CONCLUSIONS

Limiting the number of words per notecard contributes to improved student presentations. Students who can neither read their presentations from their slides or from their notecards perceive themselves to be making better presentations. Limitations on the type and quantity of text per slide and the number of words per notecard contribute to students investing additional preparation and practice time in their presentations. These findings are consistent with the preponderance of the presentation literature reviewed for this research. In both the authors' (of this article) and students' opinions, the small amount of information allowed on notecards improved the students' presentations because the cards could not be relied on for anything more than jogging the presenters' memory. Thus, more thought about what to put on the cards as well as increased practice time led to better quality presentations.
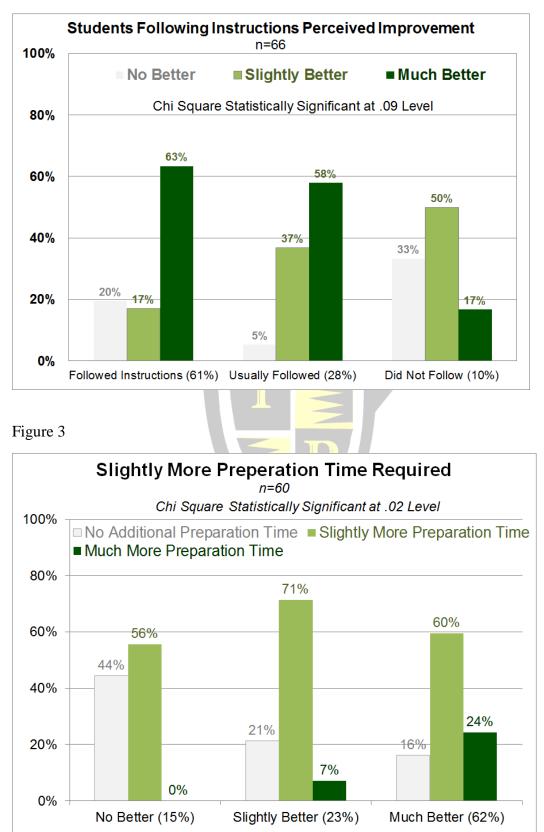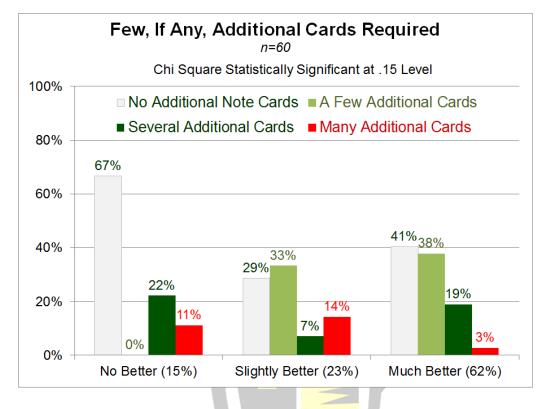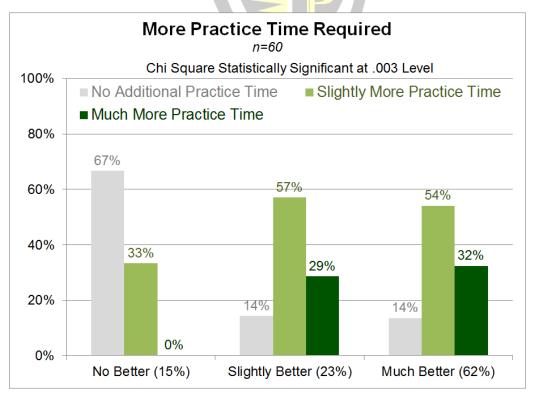
## APPENDIX

Figure 1

Figure 2



**Students Following Instructions Perceived Improvement**
n=66

Chi Square Statistically Significant at .09 Level

Legend: No Better, Slightly Better, Much Better

Followed Instructions (61%): 20%, 17%, 63%
Usually Followed (28%): 5%, 37%, 58%
Did Not Follow (10%): 33%, 50%, 17%

Figure 3



**Slightly More Preperation Time Required**
n=60
Chi Square Statistically Significant at .02 Level

Legend: No Additional Preparation Time, Slightly More Preparation Time, Much More Preparation Time

No Better (15%): 44%, 56%, 0%
Slightly Better (23%): 21%, 71%, 7%
Much Better (62%): 16%, 60%, 24%

Figure 4



**Few, If Any, Additional Cards Required**
*n=60*
Chi Square Statistically Significant at .15 Level

Figure 5



**More Practice Time Required**
*n=60*
Chi Square Statistically Significant at .003 Level

## QUESTIONNAIRE

Did you follow your professor's instruction to have no more than 3 words on each presentation note card?  _____ Yes _____ No  _____ Usually

How did the requirement affect your preparation for your presentation?
_____ required no additional note cards
_____ required a few additional note cards
_____ required several additional note cards
_____ required many additional note cards

_____ required no additional time preparing the presentation
_____ required slightly more time preparing the presentation
_____ required considerably more time preparing the presentation

_____ required no additional time practicing the presentation
_____ required slightly more additional time practicing the presentation
_____ required considerably more additional time practicing the presentation

_____ caused me to make no better presentation
_____ caused me to make a slightly better presentation
_____ caused me to make a much better presentation

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