

Dynamic Dozen

DESIGN

Tips from top presenters from the American Evaluation Association

This study consisted of interviews with a dozen of the top AEA presenters to get their secrets about how to make and deliver great presentations. Their comments were grouped into three stages of presenting: message, design, and delivery. This report focuses solely on Design, that is, the intentional composition of slides. While the context for their talks spanned long and short presentations, and included different types of audiences and purposes, their insights can be used or modified by evaluators for their own presentations at the AEA annual conference and elsewhere. Moreover, their suggestions may not be suited for the comfort level of all presenters. Take what you can and apply it to your own context to make your presentations more potent.

The second stage in creating or editing a presentation is design. Our Dynamic Dozen identified three main considerations for presentation design: technology, language, and handouts.

SLIDESHOWS ARE AN EXPECTATION, BUT NOT THE FOCUS

Our Dynamic Dozen agreed the message is the most important part of the presentation, not the slides. Therefore, most of them designed their slides as one of the last steps to building a presentation. Although all presenters identified using slideshows, they indicated they continue to search for new and better ways to present their material.

1. **PowerPoint.** The majority used PowerPoint when giving a presentation; however, they often reflected on its fit, wondering “does it make sense to use PowerPoint?” One noted, “PowerPoint is really a go-to as a way to convey quickly and through multiple channels.” It can help to engage the audience and meet the demands of different learning styles, but some felt PowerPoint presentations were often “mind numbing” and could be designed better.

2. **Keynote.** Those using Keynote, a slide design software for Macs, said it is a “more visual,” “simple [to use]” product “allow[ing] for creative experimentation” when compared to other presentation software. However, because Keynote is not the most common presentation technology, users reported also having a backup PowerPoint version available.
3. **Prezi.** Just one of the Dynamic Dozen identified using Prezi during a past presentation and found it “hard to use” and has not used it since. Although new technology can be fun, it can also be tough to understand how to use it and use it right.
4. **No technology.** One reported designing presentations 25% of the time with no slideshow. This presenter said that after “looking at what else the audience had been subjected to” over the course of the day, the presenter may make the decision to present technology-free. Instead, role-play or flip chart drawings were used to communicate with the audience. Some settings, like roundtable discussions or panel talks, may be appropriate for technology-free presentations.

Our Dynamic Dozen identified two ways to create good presentations using slide technology:



PRO TIP

USE THE P2I HANDOUT ON [PRESENTATION SLIDE DESIGN](#) TO HELP YOU DESIGN YOUR SLIDES.

1. **“Use as few words as possible.”** They said slide text should be kept to a minimum, outlining only the key points, because “people do not want to read” the presentation and “no one wants a data dump.” However, they also reported they continue to struggle to keep text to a minimum, especially if the presentation is posted in a public forum such as the AEA eLibrary. They worried that the audience may misconstrue content if it lacked more supporting detail on the slides and therefore felt compelled to incorporate more text than they wanted. One way to address this concern is to create and post an accompanying handout, as discussed later on.
2. **Always use visuals.** Visuals can be used literally or as a metaphor, but should illustrate the key points in the presentation. One presenter noted, “the visuals really help take the boring and make it as exciting as possible.” Visuals can include charts, graphs, or pictures. Although most of our Dynamic Dozen incorporated visuals in their presentation, most said they felt they “didn’t do it well.” Some admitted to relying on clipart but said they were working to add in more authentic images. So what kinds of tools did our presenters use to create their visuals?



PRO TIP

INDEX YOUR SLIDE IMAGES USING [ZOOM](#) TO HELP KEEP IMAGES IN ONE ORGANIZED LOCATION THAT'S EASY TO SEARCH.

Charts & Graphs

- [PowerPoint Smart Art](#)
- [Excel](#)
- [Word](#)
- [Visio](#)
- [Inkscape](#)
- [Vensim](#)

Images

- [Google Images](#)
- Own photographs
- Clipart
- Stock Photography
[123rf](#), [iStockPhoto](#), [Photos](#),
[ThinkStockPhotos](#)

Here is what our Dynamic Dozen were looking for when searching for images on the web or taking their own pictures:

1. **Pictures that tell a story.** Find or take images that will punctuate the presentation message. Images should be related to presentation content, either literally or as a metaphor.
2. **High quality pictures.** Find or use images that are clear and of good quality, not images that are “muddy or grainy.” Quality “sometimes trumps [the image] you want to use.” One presenter recommended when taking your own photos “you need to have good lighting because you’re basing it all on quality.”

USE EVERYDAY LANGUAGE

When designing presentations it is important to pay particular attention to the use of language. One of the Dynamic Dozen recommended that presenters “use everyday language, not scientific” jargon, which can lose some audience members. This is particularly the case when the audience and the presenter come from different fields. Everyday language shows an effort to maintain a connection with the audience, increasing the likelihood they will be able to follow along throughout the presentation. This applies to both slide content and to the spoken words.

CREATE HANDOUTS

Some created handouts for dissemination during the presentations. Handouts served two main purposes. First, handouts gave physical space to let audience members think through complex concepts. Second, handouts provided the opportunity to follow along with what was being discussed, which was particularly useful when the presenter and audience did not speak the same first language. What kind of handouts did our Dynamic Dozen create?

1. **Printing out the presentation slides.** Four of the Dynamic Dozen said that if they were to use a handout it would be a printout of their PowerPoint slides. Most commonly they identified printing three slides per page to provide audience members the opportunity to take notes on the right hand side of the page. A few said they used a modified version of the presenter's slides saying "I always create two versions of the presentation—one with the activities in it for me and one without the activities that the audience gets as a handout."
2. **Workbook.** One of the Dynamic Dozen created a bound workbook that contained both the presentation and activities audience members would work through.
3. **Single item handouts.** Some distributed complex graphs, tables, figures, or theoretical frameworks to provide audience members a more tangible copy on which to take notes, without necessarily distributing all slides.
4. **Posted online.** One of the Dynamic Dozen talked about uploading slides online. "I make sure people know that ahead of time so they aren't madly trying to write down everything. Especially with all the tech stuff, I don't want them to try and write down every URL. I will remind people again, as it comes up, that they will have access to the PowerPoint afterward."

Further Resources

Ready to extend your delivery skills? Check out these resources compiled from AEA members.

WATCH

Jennifer Sulewski's [Coffee Break Webinar on Universal Design](#) – In this webinar, Jennifer explains some of the design considerations for audience members with disabilities.

Johanna Morariu & Veena Pankaj's [Coffee Break Webinar on Data Visualization](#) – In this 20-minute video, Johanna and Veena share tips for creating useful graphs.

John Nash's [Coffee Break Webinar on Beyond Bullet Points](#) – This webinar showcases effective slide design.

READ

Nancy Duarte's book, [slideology: The Art and Science of Creating Great Presentations](#) – Perhaps no better illustration of the power of beautiful slides.

Stephanie Evergreen's blog, [Intentional Data Visualization and Evaluation Reporting](#) – This blog features demonstrates and examples of the best practices in design of evaluation-based data displays and slides.

DOWNLOAD

[p2i Slide Design Guidelines](#) – These guidelines detail the basics strategies for handling font, color, graphics and more in slideshows.

About the Dynamic Dozen

We interviewed 12 evaluators from 3 different countries, including: Canada, Australia, and the United States. Here are the Dynamic Dozen:

[Gail Barrington](#)

[Jean King](#)

[Tom Chapel](#)

[Susan Kistler](#)

[Phaedra Corso](#)

[Michael Quinn Patton](#)

[David Devlin-Foltz](#)

[Patricia Rogers](#)

[David Fetterman](#)

[Jeff Wasbes](#)

[Robert Kahle](#)

[Rebecca Woodland](#)

On average the experts have been presenting more than 25 years and present more than 20 times each year. They reported currently spending about half as much time preparing for presentations as when they first started presenting. When asked if they had studied the art of presenting, half of them said they had reflected on their own presentations, observed other presenters, read books, or taken classes. We asked the dynamic dozen to identify another presenter they admired. They identified:

[Steve Jobs](#)

[George Carlin](#)

[Dick Hardt](#)

[Hans Rosling](#)

[Mike Morris](#)

[Hetty Roessingh](#)

[Andy Papachristos](#)

[Malcolm Gladwell](#)

[Andy Goodman](#)

[Michael Quinn Patton](#)

[Larry Lessig](#)

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ABOUT THE STUDY METHODS.



About Us

The [American Evaluation Association](#) is an international professional association of evaluators devoted to the application and exploration of program evaluation, personnel evaluation, technology, and many other forms of evaluation. Evaluation involves assessing the strengths and weaknesses of programs, policies, personnel, products, and organizations to improve their effectiveness. AEA has approximately 7300 members representing all 50 states in the US as well as over 60 foreign countries.

The American Evaluation Association commissioned this study as part of the [Potent Presentation Initiative](#) (p2i). p2i is designed to help AEA members improve their presentation skills on at the AEA annual conference and beyond through professional development around presentation message, design, and delivery. Based on audience ratings from past AEA presentations, we identified the top 12 presenters to interview them about their strategies around message, design, and delivery. Their advice can help both budding and seasoned presenters develop and refine their presentation skills and efforts.

This report was prepared by Anjanette Raber under contract with the American Evaluation Association.



Figure 1. A *Wordle*, or word cloud, visually describing the skills and characteristics of the admired presenters. Humor, stories, visuals, and connections were repeating themes among presentations skills that were admired.