

AL'S TOP TEN RULES FOR SLIDE SHOWS

By Al Menaster
2025

More people seem to be using slide show programs; mostly PowerPoint. I've been to many talks where as soon as the speaker breaks out PowerPoint, the audience moans. We've all been subject to torture in the form of PowerPoint.

I have many stories illustrating this, but here's my favorite. My friend went to a talk from an expert on capital cases. He reported that the substance of the talk was quite excellent. But it was ruined because the speaker had written out every word of his talk and put each one of those words in a PowerPoint. Within minutes my friend, and the entire audience, couldn't process anything the expert was saying. If you're going to write out your argument or your talk, just hand it out, don't read screens.

There are, actually, some basic principles about using slide show programs effectively. These are Al's Top Ten Rules for Slide Shows. My hope is that you'll save this and pull it out the next time you put decide to use a slide show program, to help you make a better show. The goal is not technology. The goal is to use technology to help you make your cross or direct examinations, opening statements, or final arguments as great as they can be. These rules apply to all slide shows.

Al's Number One Rule: Don't put every word you're going to say into slides and then read each word to your jury or your judge. I can't tell you how many times I've seen people violate this rule. The result is always the worst use of a slide show program possible. Don't do this! Ever! The judge or jury doesn't need to see every word (or even most of the words) you are saying up on the screen. Worse, your audience needs to see you talking to them, not reading to them. They hate it when you are reading to them off a screen, not even looking at them.

Al's Number Two Rule: Don't put too much text on any one slide. I see people putting long quotes on a single slide. I see people putting ten bullet points on a single slide. The odds are that your audience (some of whom may be 20 or 30 feet or more away from the screen) can't read all that. Plus, putting too much stuff on a screen makes it impossible for the audience to comprehend it. I figure that two short sentences are the most that should go on a single screen. One sentence is better. Bullet points? If you're up at five or six bullet points, it's time to break the points into two slides. Occasionally it is crucial to have five or six points on the screen at the same time. If so, make sure each point is only a couple of words so it doesn't go on two lines. If the exact words are crucial and go more than one line, break the points into several slides. Your ideal is three bullet points, one per line. Four, OK. Five; no: make two slides.

Al's Number Three Rule: Make your text big and bold. Remember, folks 20 feet away or further are supposed to be seeing this. Even in a small room, small text is way too hard to read. Size up your text so it's gigantic. This is the corollary of Rule Number Two. And here's a trick

that the great Kathy Quant taught me. Block ALL the text and make it bold. The combination of a huge font size and bold text makes your text so much easier to read.

Al's Number Four Rule: Use a slide for a quotation you are going to read to your audience. When I do use text, here's the way I use it. I really hate reading a quotation to the audience. Unless you have the thing memorized, you are going to stop talking to the audience. Instead, you will be reading to them. This breaks your contact with them. If I have a quotation I just absolutely have to read and it's too long to memorize, or there are several such quotations in my talk, I put the quotation on a slide (keeping in mind Rule Number Two). I then read the slide to the audience. I know this seems like it violates Rule Number One, but it's OK if done very sparingly in a talk. I think reading the slide to audience is a better alternative than losing contact with the audience by reading to them from your notes and not looking at them.

Al's Number Five Rule: Don't create a slide show that's all text. Even if you follow Rules One and Two, your show will be hard to watch if it's all text. Try to liven up a show with something: a picture, a sound clip, something. Can you illustrate a point with a picture? Or a special effect? Or are you going to give an example? Perhaps you can come up with a visual to reinforce the example. Or perhaps a visual can be used to involve the audience. I sometimes think of some musical association with a point I'm trying to make. I implore you to break up an all-text show with *something else*.

Al's Number Six Rule: Don't make your show a dazzling display of special effects to no purpose. Some folks, once they realize all the backgrounds, slide transitions, and special effects so easy to use in a slide show, go hog wild and make every slide a work of art. Your presentation shouldn't be you showing off. If each slide appears in a different way and there is a spectacular special effect on each slide, the audience will be dazzled. But it will be harder to focus on your actual content and they will quickly tire of all the effects and tune out. Use special effects to be, well, special. To emphasize a few points, or even one. Oh, and a word on slide transitions. Don't have the slides come in all different ways: clock, sweep, fade, dissolve, etc. Again, this is just distracting and annoying. I favor no transition at all. All the slide show programs allow you to set your transitions for all your slides. I choose Instant or No Transition. You hit the Enter button or the left mouse button: bing, next slide. If you must have a transition, I favor Slide In, Top to Bottom, or Cover Down. It seems to me that we read top to bottom, so having text come in top to bottom is the most intuitive to me. I'm talking about the entire slide here. Bullet points can and should slide in, probably right to left, since that's what most folks expect.

Al's Number Seven Rule: Not every point needs a slide. Your presentation should not be driven by the slides; the slides should be driven by your presentation. It is the rare presentation that needs a slide for every point. I sometimes do talks where only a third of the points have slides at all. The rest of the time might involve skits, or, gasp, just me talking. The question you need to ask is, "What does the slide add to the talk?" Emphasizing a quotation or showing several prongs of a complex legal principle might call for a slide. In my *Crawford* talk, I cover a dozen or so hearsay exceptions. I introduce each one with a slide that has a funny or goofy photograph or an interesting drawing. This is designed to help the audience keep track of where we are, and to instantly recall what hearsay exception we're talking about.

Al's Number Eight Rule: Colors. Do not create a show with a white background. And don't use black for the text on a white background. All the slide show programs allow you to set the background. I favor a restful soft blue solid background, with white text. For emphasis, I use yellow. If I have to do more emphasis to contrast with the yellow emphasis, I use magenta. You want your stuff to be easy to see and read. I don't favor fancy or spectacular backgrounds; I say keep it simple.

Al's Number Nine Rule: Don't use the edges. Work very hard to avoid having anything near the four edges of each slide: top, bottom, right, left. If you use text and the crucial "not" is on the right edge of the slide, you can bet that the actual projection will cut off an inch on the right side of the slide, erasing the "not." Oops. This is also true of pictures where there's a caption, text, or something in the picture that has to be seen. Make the picture smaller if need be, but don't rely on the actual projection showing a corner or edge of a slide.

Al's Number Ten Rule: THINK! This is the toughest rule. When you sit down to create your show, stop for a minute (or an hour or a day) and think. Maybe discuss it with a friend. What, exactly, are you trying to do? A show heavy on quotations and text is going to be a bad show. Can you think of a picture or a sound effect or a sound clip? Try to come up with a theme folks will remember. My *Crawford* talk used pictures for the three theories of what "testimonial" meant. Folks who have seen it refer to these theories by my slide pictures: steak, chicken, tofu. This is how people learn and remember. Help them. It will make your shows sizzle.