

BOOK REVIEWS

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Editor

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**Beyond Bullet Points:
Using Microsoft
PowerPoint to Create
Presentations That
Inform, Motivate,
and Inspire**

Cliff Atkinson. 2005. Redmond, WA: Microsoft Press. [ISBN 0-7356-2052-0. 223 pages, including index. \$24.99 USD (softcover).]

Cliff Atkinson takes a radical and intriguing approach to designing PowerPoint decks (sets of slides) and delivering presentations. As the title, *Beyond bullet points*, suggests, Atkinson wants to do away entirely with bullet points. Instead, he calls for slides consisting solely of sentence-style slide titles and a graphic, very often clip art. Speakers, of course, have given compelling presentations without PowerPoint and very often without visuals for thousands of years. So it's no surprise that we can do without bullet points. But should we?

Atkinson's premise is that speakers generally fill their slides with lengthy and often irrelevant bullet points that they read verbatim to their audience. Perhaps so—although most of us, I think, know people who speak effectively from well-designed decks in which the bullet points are apt, succinct, and useful. Perhaps you are one of those folks. Bullet points, in fact, can greatly benefit a presentation by keeping key ideas on the screen while the speaker elaborates on these ideas. (And, of course, bullet points need not appear on every slide.) When PowerPoint is used correctly, the slide text, the graphics, and the oral channel complement each other. Furthermore, although slides should never be used as speaker's notes, an uncluttered su-

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perstructure of bullet points and slide titles helps the speaker as well as the audience stay on track.

When might bullet points be superfluous? Perhaps in a “lite” presentation where there is little for the audience to absorb. The more substantive the presentation, however, the more helpful bullet points will be. Atkinson claims that his book “aligns” with current research in educational psychology and learning, and he cites the work of Richard Mayer. But Atkinson cannot cite research supporting his core idea that bullet points should be eliminated.

Atkinson’s book is built around an elaborate, clever, but very rigid method that encompasses the entire process of planning, writing, illustrating, and building the deck, as well as scripting and rehearsing the performance. For each presentation you deliver, you employ a form, downloadable as a Microsoft Word template. The sentences you type into the form (which, collectively, are much like an executive summary) are ultimately exported to PowerPoint (using the Send To command), where they become slide titles. You then edit the slide titles, add graphics, and type your actual speaking script in the PowerPoint notes page.

The form is beneficial in various ways. For example, it leads you to focus on your audience, your audience’s needs, and your purpose in communicating, and it prompts you to write a 5-minute, a 15-minute, and a 45-minute version of your presentation. This results in a lot of slides, many of which may never be used, but enforces careful preparation and enables you to adjust the level of detail while presenting.

Atkinson envisions every presentation as a variation on the problem-solution organizational scheme, and so his form guides you through the process of creating a problem-solution narrative. It is true that a problem, need, or opportunity underlies

every act of communication (otherwise, why communicate?), but Atkinson tries to reduce all communication situations to a straightforward problem-solution pattern. The book's ongoing example is a presentation proposing a marketing plan for the Contoso Pharmaceutical Corporation's new miracle pill that doubles your IQ. I suspect that Atkinson's readers will not always find a clear cut problem-solution pattern in the communication situations that give rise to their presentations. Or the problem-solution pattern, while apparent, might not function well as the fulcrum on which to organize the presentation.

I am troubled by Atkinson's claim that only sentence-style slide titles can serve the needs of audiences. Why so? A slide title, I think, can be a noun phrase if the speaker expresses the proposition that is not explicit in the noun phrase. In fact, it is often harder for a speaker to elaborate on a full sentence than on a noun phrase.

If you don't allow bullet points, what will appear below the slide titles? In many cases, the answer is graphs, tables, and other substantive graphics—just as in conventional presentations. But since you are creating more slides than you can illustrate with substantive graphics, Atkinson's solution is thematically relevant but non-substantive graphics, mostly clip art (including stock photography). Atkinson's argument is that such clip art is visually appealing and makes an emotional connection with the audience. However, he fails to consider the significance of genre here: abundant clip art might be appropriate for a marketing pitch, but it is much less so in a technical briefing or feasibility report.

Atkinson advocates metaphors, to me very clichéd metaphors, to help express problem-solution relationships. The Contoso Corporation, it seems, is navigating a sea of

change and faces tough sailing through these rough waters. Approving the marketing plan will ensure a smooth journey. Atkinson also recommends sports metaphors, so corporate audiences might face a sea of change one day and a week later find themselves one run behind in the bottom of the ninth inning. Although metaphors provide vivid themes for the clip art, I suspect that many corporate audiences will not appreciate them week after week.

The book includes many valuable tips about PowerPoint design and professional communication (for example, enlist colleagues to review your deck). There is also good instruction on using PowerPoint. But Atkinson's core strategy is idiot-proofing the design process. His all-encompassing method strongly constrains how you prepare a presentation and what the result will be. Unskilled presenters—and there are millions of them—may do better using this book than proceeding on their own.

Sophisticated presenters have much broader ideas about how to use PowerPoint and will disagree with the author's simplistic strategy.

David K. Farkas

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Powerful Proposals: How to Give Your Business the Winning Edge

David G. Pugh and Terry R. Bacon. 2005. New York, NY: American Management Association. [ISBN 0-8144-7232-X. 254 pages, including index. \$24.95 USD.]



Powerful proposals is the ideal book for people involved in business and academia. Pugh and Bacon have provided a useful book on creating the best proposal to win that contract or grant. They not only show how to make a winning proposal, but also demonstrate the bases for evaluation and the process by which most proposals are evaluated. *Powerful proposals* is filled with golden rules for making your proposal competitive and successful. The authors state that “a proposal is not an isolated event but a critical part of a larger process” (81), which confirms what has been offered to the customer rather than offering a solution.

This book provides helpful hints and tips from the basic to the more advanced, giving you insights into making your proposal stand out and be what the customer wants. Pugh and Bacon break the business environment into its key elements and then show how to build it up layer by layer.

You learn, for example, how to write an executive summary that focuses on benefits to the customer. You learn a seven-step process for making your proposal easy to read. And you learn many ways to improve your internal review process.

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