

How-to

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Your Dais Will Come. Portable and engaging presentations with PDF and Acrobat

Not so many years ago, a presenter's standby tools were a telescoping pointer and any slide carousel that advanced without a sticky hiccup. The carousel stands silent now, and the pointer has given way to a bitmapped arrow that clicks through an on-screen slide show projected from a laptop computer.

If you find yourself needing such a show but lack experience with a full-blown presentations program such as Microsoft PowerPoint, don't fret. Here's how you can use your favorite word processor or page layout tool, such as Adobe PageMaker, in combination with Adobe Acrobat software to create and display on-screen PDF presentations.

On the road with PDF

Presenting a show in PDF (portable document format) instead of using a dedicated presentations tool has many advantages (besides saving you the effort of learning the presentations program). PDF keeps your presentation files small and makes them portable to any Windows or Macintosh system that's equipped

with Acrobat Reader or Acrobat Exchange. It can faithfully depict fonts, images, and your layout. More importantly, PDF can embed those fonts—essential for nomadic shows that will be projected from different systems.



Keep their eyes open

Color in an on-screen show is surprisingly important: it uses projected light (not reflected light, as in print), which increases eye fatigue. It's best to use white or light type on a very dark background. Avoid overly bright colors and combinations that "vibrate" on screen.

Even if you tote your own font-equipped laptop, PDF can save your bacon if Murphy's Law of Traveler's Computer Crises strikes. Nearly every speaker has a war story about laptop batteries running low, power cords forgotten at home, projection hardware that wouldn't talk to the laptop, or equipment

being stolen en route to an engagement. Having a show-ready PDF file on disk (or e-mailed to you, if you're really in a panic) can help you keep your cool if you ever have to switch to another Acrobat-equipped system at the last minute (remember, Reader is available on Adobe's Web site, free of charge).

But for all its merits, even PDF can't salvage a set of slides that are so poorly designed that an audience is left baffled or bored. So, before we get to PDF, here are some guidelines for creating engaging slides.

The lowdown on layout

Typically, presentation visuals have one of three layout structures: all text, all art, or a two-column format of both. They also usually have a few static design elements, an underlying graphical architecture (grid), and a consistent color palette and typography. To produce such a layout, you can either exercise your word processor's muscles or use a standard page-layout program. In either case, you must think screen, not paper, as the output.

Be spare but strong with your design. Most speakers forget the cardinal rule of slide creation: visuals belong to your audience, not to you. Since most audiences recall only 10 percent of most oral presentations, your job is to put that 10 percent on the slides in a way that viewers can grasp in 5 to 10 seconds.

To begin, open your source program and start with an 8.5-by-11-inch page set at landscape (wide) page orientation. This should nicely fill up the screen on most monitors when viewed in Acrobat's Full Screen mode. Allow for ample margins—one inch all around at least—so that content doesn't get cramped at the sides and the lines of text stay short enough for an audience to scan easily.

Slides really have very little room, so use graphical

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elements sparingly to leave space for your message. Build a consistent grid to provide clues about the content's hierarchy. Make elements that deserve more attention larger than less important items, or put them closer to the top of the slide instead of at the bottom. Headers or footers are excellent for establishing graphical continuity or your company identity. These elements might include lines across the top or bottom of the slide, corporate logos or thematic clip art tucked into a corner, or a company name running at the base of the slide. Just be sure to place similar items in a consistent spot, so the audience isn't distracted by where they will show up next. Charts and graphs are best centered, because they often have labels surrounding them. If you plan to use both a graphic and text on a slide, decide which element is more important and give that one more visual weight.

Think BIG about text. To automatically gain typographic consistency, create a simple style sheet of Title, Subtitle, Bulleted List, and Body Text; you may also find a Label style helpful for annotating charts and diagrams. Define these styles larger than you might think—24 to 36 points for heads and 22 to 28 points for the rest of the text (even larger for serif fonts such as Times); make labels no smaller than 18 points. These sizes are the only way to keep the visuals readable for your audience—which is, after all, the point.

(However, recurring text can be smaller, 14 points or so, since it's acting more as a design item.)

Use strong, easily readable typefaces such as Frutiger, Futura, Myriad, or Helvetica, and vary the weight with

Slide easily into PDF

For those of you creating slides in a word-processing program, often the easiest way to get to PDF is with the PDFWriter printer driver that's installed with Acrobat. If any slides contain EPS art, however, or if you designed the slides in a graphics program such as Adobe PageMaker or Adobe Illustrator, first print to PostScript and then use Acrobat Distiller to make the PDF file. This provides better-quality EPS graphics and fonts, and better file compression.

Even if you're working in a word-processing program, Distiller might be the best choice, depending on the content of your slides. You may need to experiment a little to see which method gives you the best results. For information about using PDFWriter with Microsoft Word 97, see this issue's Acrobat Q&A on page 49. For information on other applications, see the PDFWriter 3.0 ReadMe file.

Using PDFWriter

1. Activate the PDFWriter driver: In Windows, choose Print from the File menu of your source program, and choose Acrobat PDFWriter from the pop-up menu in the Print dialog box. On the Macintosh, go to the Apple menu, open the Chooser, and select the Acrobat PDFWriter printer driver.
 2. Open the dialog box containing the PDFWriter options: In Windows, click Properties in the Print dialog box. On the Macintosh, you'll usually find these options in the Page Setup (or equivalent) dialog box (choose Page Setup from the File menu).
 3. Click the Compression button and choose the version of Acrobat from the Compatibility pop-up menu. The safest choice is Acrobat 2.1, but the PDF file could be bigger than with 3.0 compatibility, and you won't be able to embed Type 1 fonts (see the next step). The Acrobat 3.0 format, however, can't be opened by version 2.0 of either Acrobat Reader or Exchange. Specify 3.0 only if you're positive the viewing computer will have version 3.0 of Reader or Exchange installed. (Acrobat 3.0 also gives you more options for displaying the slides.)
 4. Embed the fonts: Click the Fonts button and select Embed All Fonts (this adds all the fonts that are *used* in the file, not every one that's on your system). Also select Subset TrueType and Subset Type 1 (available only if you specified 3.0 compatibility in step 3). Click OK.
- The subset options help reduce the PDF file size; if less than 35 percent of a font's characters are used in the slides, the font is subsetted—only that percentage of characters will be embedded in the file. Otherwise, the whole font travels with it.
5. Back in the main dialog box for PDFWriter settings, make sure that the page size and orientation settings (landscape) are the same as that of your slides. Click OK.
 6. Choose Print from the File menu. In the Print dialog box, specify which pages you want to print, and click OK to name and create the PDF file.

Acrobatic fancies

Exchange 3.0 lets you set page actions to make movies or sounds play when you open or close a slide. Such effects make a PDF file much less portable because the files must be taken along too, but if handled well, the results can be stunning. For more information, see "Specifying an Action" in the Exchange Online Guide.

Handy handouts or speaker notes

Need speaker notes or handouts to accompany your slides? Pair them up with their corresponding visuals by putting the slide content on odd pages, and handout or speaker notes on even pages. Then print only the odd pages to PDF, and only the even pages to your laser printer.

bold, black, or italic versions—anything that offers a lot of contrast. Subtle differences in weight become less apparent once type is anti-aliased during PDF generation. Keep the letter spacing slightly more open, too, especially at smaller point sizes; anti-aliasing can cause edges to intermingle otherwise.

To test fonts, sizes, and the background, stand 10 feet from your monitor. If you can't comfortably read the text, your audience won't be able to either, even when it's projected to a large screen. (Although the letters get bigger, the audience gets farther away, so the size relationship stays about the same.)

Using Distiller

1. Activate a PostScript printer driver: In Windows, choose the driver from the Print dialog box of your source program. On a Macintosh, select any PostScript driver from the Chooser.
2. In your source program, choose Print from the File menu, select the page range for the slides, and select the print-to-file option to create a PostScript file. Name the file and click Save.
3. Start Acrobat Distiller 3.0. From the Distiller menu, choose Job Options, and then click the General tab and choose either Acrobat 2.1 or Acrobat 3.0 from the Compatibility pop-up menu (see step 3 in the PDFWriter instructions for a description of the choices). Click the Font Embedding tab and select Embed All Fonts and Subset Fonts Below, leaving the amount at 35 percent (see step 4 in the PDFWriter instructions).
4. Choose Open from the File menu, select the PostScript file you created in step 2, and then click Open. Name the PDF file and click Save.

Lights down, PDF up

After you've gone to PDF, you're ready to use Acrobat Exchange (or Reader) to turn static pages into a bona fide, full-screen presentation. First, in Exchange, open the PDF file you created and choose Open from the Document Info submenu of the File menu. Select the Open In Full Screen Mode option (Full Screen in 2.1), leave the other settings at their defaults, and save the file. When opened, the file will automatically display in full-screen mode.

Next, you can specify slide-show settings. But since these settings are saved not with the file but with Exchange or Reader, you need to specify them on the copy of the program you're using for the presentation. (Of course, you will have made sure that Reader or Exchange is installed on the target computer.)

To adjust on-screen settings: choose Full Screen from the Preferences submenu of the File menu (the Edit menu in 2.1) and mix and match the options.

- For keyboard or mouse-based control over when slides change, select Advance On Any Click (the With Keyboard option in Acrobat 2.1). Be aware that you can use the arrow keys to go back and forth.
- To make slides advance automatically, select the Advance Every option (the Every option in Acrobat 2.1) and set the time between slides from 1 to 99 seconds. If you're speaking with this mode on, practice your timing carefully.
- The Background Color option controls the color beyond the PDF file's page area. Keep it black for the cleanest look and to conceal the page edge.
- In Acrobat 3.0, you can add visual interest to a show by choosing a transition from the pop-up menu to animate the changing of slides. Sample them to find one you like. Wipes, Splits, and Box In/Out do well. Glitters and Dissolve can quickly get old because they take more time to complete.

Making slides say something

Until you're used to working in slide format, you may be surprised at how little you can put on a slide and still have it quickly comprehensible. Here are a few suggestions for succinctly expressing your ideas.



Delete liberally. Resist the temptation to reduce type sizes to make things fit. Ruthlessly edit instead. Confine each slide to one concept, trimming each idea to the 35 or fewer words that capture the 10 percent you want the audience to walk away with. This usually leaves room for a comfortable maximum of five bullets, or eight lines, per slide. Any more text is impossible to absorb all at once and forces the slide to stay on screen too long, draining energy from your presentation. In your effort to cut words, however, don't give in to using cryptic phrases, abbreviations, and jargon.

Keep it parallel. For rapid comprehension, strive for parallel construction of text on the same slide, so points sound similar in rhythm and logic. Start all bullets with a verb, for instance, or with an adjective or noun phrase. Edit subheads, labels, and titles to be consistent among similar slides as well.

Grab attention. Avoid slide titles that are vague or vapid. Write them to capture a point or provoke interest instead. Vary the style with topic titles (Upcoming Bonus Plan), thematic titles (Bonus Plan Increases Productivity), and assertive titles (We Must Implement Bonus Plan Now).

Mind the jots. Omit extraneous colons and periods, and don't use a bullet mark if there's only one item on the slide. Consistently capitalize words, such as those in titles and the first word of bulleted points, labels, and subheads. Run a spelling checker and have a co-worker read the slides before you commit them to PDF.

With keyboard at hand, lights dimmed, and all eyes on you, you're ready to start the show. Take a deep breath, open the PDF file in Reader or Exchange, and you're on your way. Having followed the guidelines above, you can speak with confidence, knowing that your PDF on-screen show is worthy to be standing with you at the dais. ♦

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