Talia M. Wilson
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PowerPoint Paper

Recently, there has been a growing consensus that Microsoft's PowerPoint is just the latest method for displaying 'a list of points organized onto slides projected up on the wall' (Tufte 3) among corporate and government board rooms. Much to the critics' dismay, PowerPoint can be a useful tool for orators, without sacrificing analytical presentation.

In his rhetoric, Aristotle stressed that public speakers must impress the audience with his or her style of presentation. Of the five heads of speech, he explores connecting words and ambiguities more, stating that words should always be arranged in 'a natural sequence' (174) and to avoid being ambiguous, unless that was the intention, characteristic of those who have nothing to say yet pretend to mean something. (175)

Though PowerPoint may have a lower quality resolution than other overhead display formats, this should not diminish its cognitive style or leave audiences feeling ignorant or misinformed. This requires a great responsibility of the speaker for the audience and the ability to not only sustain their interest but their knowledge. As Aristotle explained, the audience must be well informed of the facts and have confidence in the speaker, whom must also enact some sort of emotional response. In addition, the audience should be mindful of the opponent and his/her/their standpoint, though retaining a favorable disposition toward the presenter.(217)

When beginning the speech, orators should use those first moments to not only establish credibility but test the waters to determine the audience's emotions. He or she should maintain the desired appropriateness for the duration of the speech, including his or her character and the nature of the presenting subject, which should remain constant. With careful maintenance,

speakers should expect the audience to maintain a similar level of tact and judgement for the speech's duration. (178) This does play into criticism that PowerPoint is more presenter-oriented, versus content- or audience-oriented (Tufte 4), but the speech may not be sacrificed into a simple lecture if the orator takes the time to initiate audience participation and/or explain facts and figures beyond what appears on the slides.

Ironically, what may help make a PowerPoint presentation successful are the six parts of a tragedy, as outlined by Aristotle: plot (mythos), character (ethos), thought (dianoia), diction (lexis), song (melos), and spectacle (opsis). The first three, he wrote, are related to the matter of a play (a Greek tragedy, for example), the next two the medium, and the latter the manner of presentation. He dictates that there is a structure for which events must take place, a hierarchy in which he determined action (spectacle) the most important element. (xxiv) Again, criticism has fallen on PowerPoint's 'hierarchical single-path structure' for organizing all content entered into its slides, particularly breaking up narrative into pre-formatted slides and small sentence fragments. (Tufte 4)

Clearly, the PowerPoint debate is one that will likely be argued as long as people continue to present information on slides, regardless of their public speaking, computer skills or analysis backgrounds. Aristotle clearly outlined oratorical, stylistic, appropriateness, and tragic guidelines for successful connections with audiences. However, the most important element in PowerPoint presentations, according to critics, shouldn't be spectacle but thought or diction. Obviously, critics like Tufte feel grammatical correctness, non-corrupt statistical analysis and content unedited and jammed onto an office wall are more favorable than a few visual examples and allow the speaker to explain the rest.

Works Cited

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Tufte, Edward R. "The Cognitive Style of PowerPoint." Graphics Press LLC. Cheshire, Conn. 2003