





Maureen Berner recently sent everyone a link to [a New York Times article](#) about the excessive use of PowerPoint in the military. The slide at the top of this post was intended to illustrate for General McChrystal the complexity of the American military strategy in Afghanistan. McChrystal's response was "[w]hen we understand that slide, we'll have won the war." Unfortunately it looks like we could be in Afghanistan for a long, long time.

The article compares PowerPoint to an insurgency that "has crept into the daily lives of military commanders and reached the level of near obsession." Junior officers—called PowerPoint Rangers—spend enormous amounts of time preparing charts, graphs, and bullet points. Notwithstanding complaints of "death by PowerPoint" from many senior officers, there is no indication that the use of the slides is declining.

"Commanders say that behind all of the PowerPoint jokes are serious concerns that the program stifles discussion, critical thinking and thoughtful decision-making." One general banned the use of PowerPoint slides during a campaign to secure a northern Iraqi city because "it can create the illusion of understanding and the illusion of control." In a presentation about the causes of a particular conflict, for example, PowerPoint's lack of nuance can be dangerous because it takes "no account of interconnected political, economic and ethnic forces." Another complaint is that "slides impart less information than a five-page paper can hold, and that they relieve the briefer of the need to polish writing to convey an analytic, persuasive point." "Imagine lawyers presenting arguments before the Supreme Court in slides instead of legal briefs."

According to a referenced [article in Armed Forces Journal](#), "[m]ake no mistake, PowerPoint is not a neutral tool—it is actively hostile to thoughtful decision-making." Decisions used to be made after



a commander had the opportunity to read a short position paper, think it over, and discuss it with staff members and other experts. Now “a decision-maker sits through a 20-minute PowerPoint presentation followed by five minutes of discussion and then is expected to make a decision.” Junior officers create slides that contain too much information because they “clearly understand the lack of clarity and depth inherent in the half-formed thoughts of the bullet format.”

These articles about PowerPoint in the military contain lessons for all of us at the School. Slides are not a good way to communicate sophisticated concepts—they may be useful in illustrating those concepts in a presentation, but they are not a good way to explain the concepts themselves. We don't use PowerPoint as a decision-making tool here, but we should teach our MPA students not to use it that way in their future jobs. Everyone also knows that slides fail if they contain too much information, but it continues to be a common problem anyway. The real problem probably has little to do with PowerPoint. It occurs when we try to tell our students more than they can possibly absorb in any given session. PowerPoint just happens to be a vehicle we use for providing that information overload.

I am not an enemy of PowerPoint—I think it can be used effectively in certain circumstances. For example, it “provides a simple, effective way to share high-impact photos, charts, graphs, film clips and humor that illustrate a lecturer's points.” We have had a number of good discussions over the years about effective presentations and the use of PowerPoint. Our Teaching & Learning Support group within the IT Division is an excellent resource for you in thinking about quality teaching, including the most effective use of PowerPoint. I encourage you to share your thoughts about PowerPoint. How have you used it effectively? When was it less successful?