

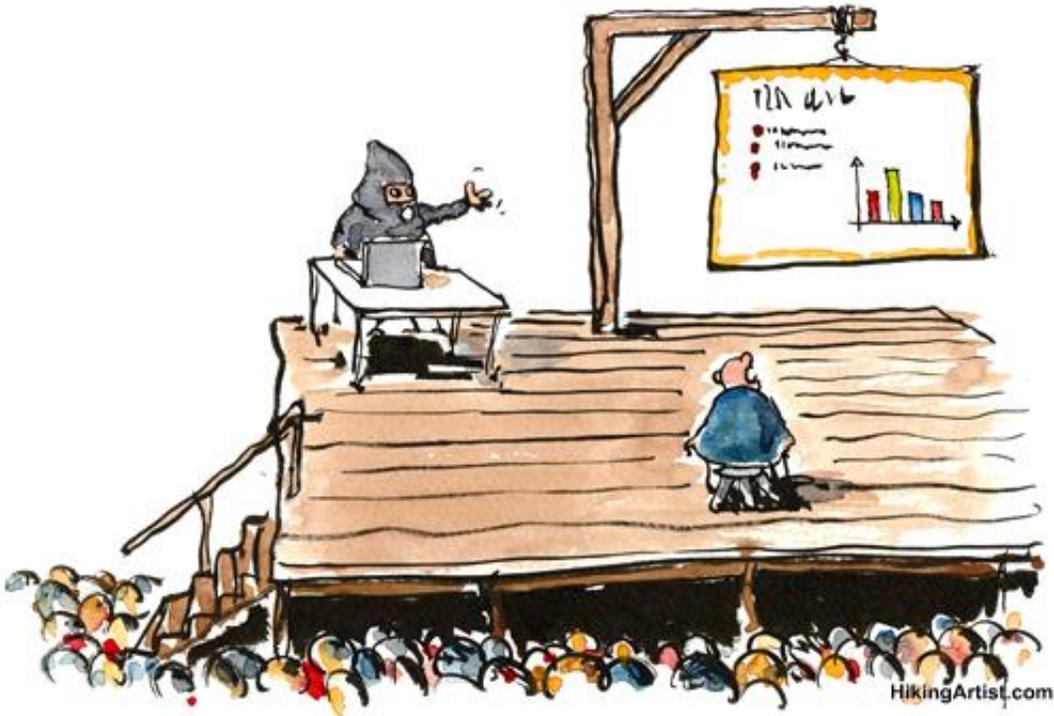


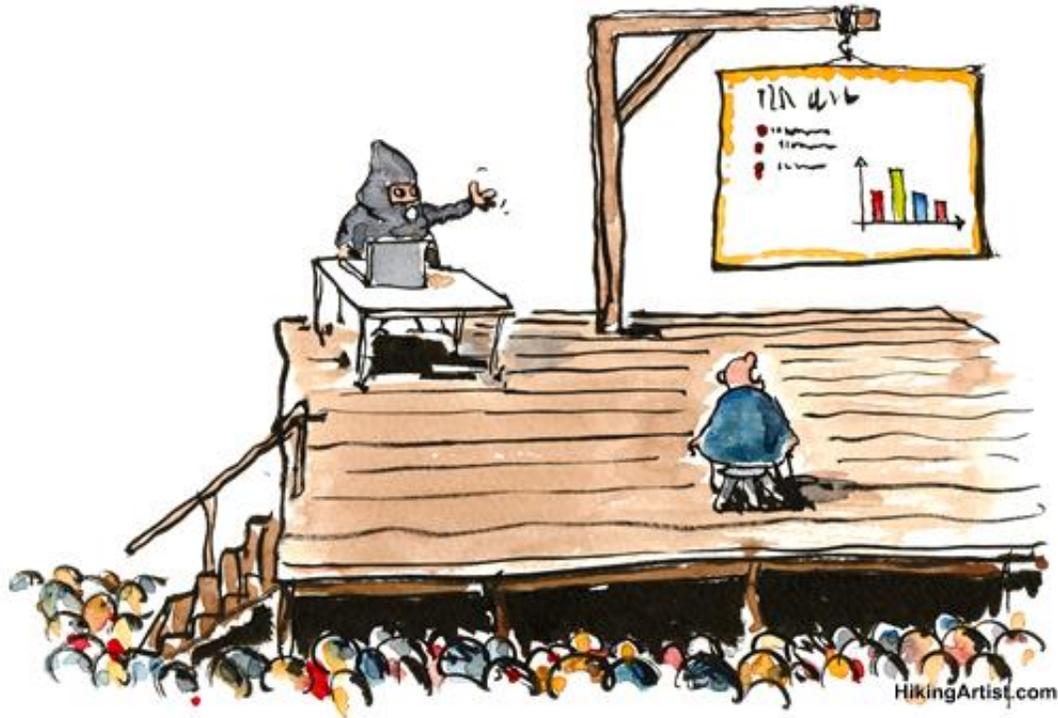
## PowerPoint Revisited

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My earlier post about the uses and abuses of PowerPoint generated a number of comments and emails. There are lots of strong opinions about PowerPoint, mostly negative and cautionary. I had remembered that Richard Whisnant did a session a few years ago on “PowerPoint and the Demise of Western Civilization.” I forgot that he started it off with a joke from a defense department contractor: “the way to win the war in Iraq is to drop copies of PowerPoint on Al Qaeda.” Now there is growing concern that the military’s reliance on PowerPoint is leading to poorly informed decisions that will undermine our strategy. We might have been better off just dropping the software on unsuspecting terrorists. Richard had a nice handout, which you can find [here](#).

I also heard from Willow Jacobson about [a segment on \*The Daily Show\*](#) that focused on the crazy PowerPoint from *The New York Times* illustrating our military strategy in Afghanistan. As usual, John Stewart is hilarious in pointing out the absurdities in using PowerPoint to set our strategy and direct our troops. I especially like his summary of how PowerPoint has been used to communicate military strategy throughout history, including before the penultimate battle in *Braveheart*. This short clip might come in handy some day if you want to talk with one of your classes about the limitations of PowerPoint.

Michael Crowell sent me [a hypothetical PowerPoint presentation](#) that might have been used by Abraham Lincoln in dedicating the Gettysburg cemetery. It is a classic. The slide that reviews the key objective and critical success factors is terrific. Click on the speaker notes and you see the real address—“These are some notes on the Gettysburg meeting. I’ll whip them into better shape when I can get on to my computer.” PowerPoint surely is not poetry, but it also is a poor substitute



for a well told story.

Two other interesting examples came from Robby Poore. He mentions [an interesting article by Edward Tufte](#) about how NASA's use of PowerPoint contributed to poor decisions during the final flight of the space shuttle Columbia. Richard Whisnant's earlier presentation had referenced Tufte—a Professor Emeritus at Yale University, where he taught courses in statistical evidence, information design, and interface design—who is [one of PowerPoint's most thoughtful critics](#). According to Tufte, the accident review board “found that the distinctive cognitive style of PowerPoint reinforced the hierarchical filtering and biases of the NASA bureaucracy during the crucial period when the Columbia was damaged but still functioning.” The bulleted slides helped NASA to pitch a superficial and more positive point of view of the risks that would not have withstood scrutiny had it been presented in a rigorous technical report. [Here](#) is a short case against PowerPoint made by Edward Tufte in *Wired* magazine.

Robby also pointed me to David Byrne of Talking Heads fame, who likes PowerPoint. [Here](#) is a nice article describing a presentation about (and with) PowerPoint that he made at Berkeley a few years ago. According to Bryne, “PowerPoint restricts users no more than any other communication platform, including a pencil: When you pick up a pencil you know what you're getting – you don't think, ‘I wish this could write in a million colors.’” [Here](#) is a short case for PowerPoint by David Byrne in *Wired* magazine. Byrne is an incredibly creative guy, but I'm not sure how much credibility he gets on the advantages of PowerPoint when he is best known for an album called “Stop Making Sense.”