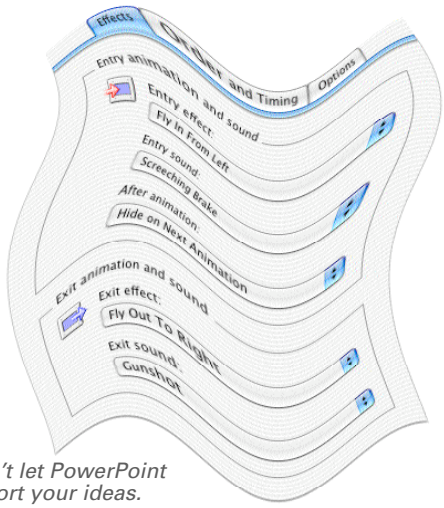
PowerPoint for the Tweed Crowd

A guide for students and teachers[†]



Don't let PowerPoint distort your ideas.

Presentation programs like Microsoft PowerPoint, also known as "slideware," present text and graphics in a consistent format on a series of slides to display on a computer. When projected for an audience, they must also be readable at a distance. Largely absent in the stampede to jump on the slideware bandwagon is careful consideration of the *effectiveness* of this media, as popularly employed, for the purpose of education and the effects it has on language learning. Like computers in general, slideware is a tool that can be used wisely to advantage or unwisely for a waste of time.

Use the tool—don't let it use you

Though supposedly designed to present content, PowerPoint is pre-occupied with format. We can't assume, therefore, that students can use it to create a meaningful presentation without instruction, guidance, and critical feedback on the effectiveness of their slideshow as a visual aid that actually enhances their presentation. Creating an effective slideshow starts with mastering the basics and concentrating on the *message*, not the medium.

The elemental slide

Because of space limitations, slides often need to display talking points in outline format, which also serve as notes for the presenter, so she doesn't have to look down at separate notes. Slides also display graphics, such as charts, diagrams, photos, and illustrations. Most everything else is extraneous to the message.

Components of a slideshow

Slide: what you view one at a time like a single page in a word processing document; a slideshow comprises a sequence of slides.

Master slide: the slide that all others are based on, containing repeating elements—presentation title, presenter name, slide number, company logo—that automatically appear on every slide.

Template: a ready-made design with text and graphic boxes already in place.

Wizard (or "AutoContent Wizard" in PP): a utility to assist in creating a slideshow by offering a limited set of choices in step-by-step procedures, having the user choose a basic layout type from among a few generic choices as well as a background design and color scheme.

Background: a custom image used as the graphic background on a slide (usually the master). Background images need to be semi-transparent to recede into the background and keep foreground text readable.

Text box: holds text that can be formatted just as in a word processor and can be moved around the slide and reshaped, which affects how the text flows; several text and picture boxes can coexist on a slide.

Picture box: holds an image from an existing image file, the clipboard, or clip art.

Animation: the orchestrated movement of text or pictures on a slide with varying speeds and visual effects.

Sound effects: added to animations or transitions to accompany movement.

Transition: visual effect of one slide going to the next.

Hyperlink: linked text or graphic that opens the designated page in Web browser.

[†] Adapted from *Computer-assisted Language Learning: A Practical Guide for Teachers*, John de Szendeffy (© University of Michigan Press, 2004).

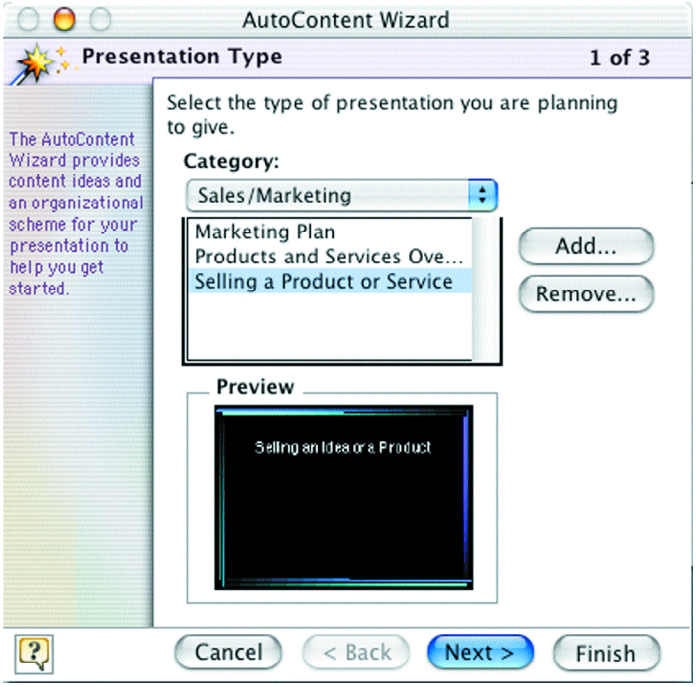
The weight of each slide needs to be appropriate for the amount of time the presenter will spend talking about it. The audience will read all the text that fits on a slide in seconds, a fraction of the time it will likely remain up. Graphics provide balance for the text and convey far *more information* in as much space, occupying viewers' attention longer.

The look

A simple, clean, bright background design provides high *contrast* and readability for dark text without interfering with the content. Many built-in PowerPoint *templates* (ready-made designs) are too dark and busy. Although each slide could be an entirely different design from the others, consistent background and layout draw less attention away from content.

A custom layout of larger text boxes could make better use of space than the small boxes used on templates. And a custom image related to the content used as the graphic background of every slide can be added to the master slide for a strong custom-made look.

Fig. 1 — The AutoContent Wizard utility.



Pick a **category** and purpose for the slideshow, click **Next**, then answer the questions that follow. The Wizard will produce several slides. The placeholder text on the slides also provide prompts for what type of information would go on each heading, each bulleted list. This very generic approach to layout and content will not likely conform to content already developed.

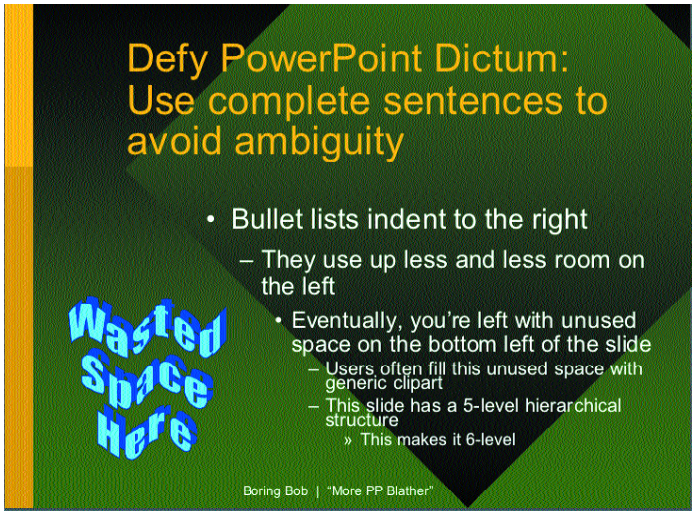
First time users might be attracted to the "AutoContent Wizard" (Fig. 1), which works like a Web page wizard—with similarly uninspiring results. This utility assists in creating a slideshow by offering a limited set of choices in a step-by-step procedure. The user chooses a basic layout type from among a few generic or corporate choices as well as a slide design. The wizard creates slides with placeholder text and image boxes that you replace with your own. You will still need to change some elements to fit your exact content. Be warned that the familiarity of the stock design to many audiences and the awkward fit of your content may expose your use of this novice device.

Thinking outside the list

Many PowerPoint users feel compelled to contort their information into the hierarchical bullet list format of templates. Bullets shun complete sentences to conserve room, but it's the embedded hierarchal format resulting from the indented list that crowds itself to the right side of the slide, leaving a large empty space on the left (Fig. 2).

Instead, display the data in a format most appropriate to its analysis—a table, schematic, flowchart, clustering bubbles, or other visual representation—using complete sentences if your meaning would be distorted or diluted with compressed headline phrases.

Fig. 2 — How indented lists work themselves into a corner.



Bullet lists use slide space inefficiently, compressing text to the lower right corner, leaving the void filled by unhelpful clip art.

The gimmicks

Software developers may add features to programs for marketing purposes without any demonstrated *reason to use them*—PowerPoint being a case in point. To keep students thinking about their content instead of amusing themselves with gimmicks, tell them what to *avoid*.

PowerPoint features to avoid

- animations
- clip art
- sound effects
- elaborate transitions

Animating text or pictures with a variety of speeds and visual effects adds little but distraction, delay, and a frivolous feel. Functional animations, on the other hand, such as one that delays text or pictures in order to evoke an audience response first, may contribute to the effectiveness of a presentation.

Most built-in **clip art** in slideware is generic enough to add little or nothing illustrative to the slide and goofy enough to threaten the credibility of the presenter. Instead, use your own images, ones that illustrate specifically what you're talking about.

Adding **sound effects** to distracting animations builds on the frivolity effect to a gratuitously annoying intensity.

Subtle **transitions** have a purpose. Some resemble ones familiar to film and video: fades, dissolves, iris open or close. And just as film and video editing observe a *grammar* of such techniques, so do professional-looking slideshows. A transition should provide an appropriate segue to the next slide and prepare the viewer for what follows while signaling a change in slide, not draw attention to the transition effect itself (such as with sound effects). When in doubt, consider the fastest, least intrusive transition for the entire slideshow.

The dangers

The dangers of using PowerPoint

- used as a crutch
- used as a telepromter
- distorts preparation
- discourages audience interaction
- sells better than explains
- reduces complex ideas
- fragments complex information

As a Crutch. Some inexperienced presenters, particularly those using a second language, mistakenly see slideware as a crutch they can lean on to prop up poor presentation or language skills. This notion assumes that what's on the screen will divert the audience from the presenter. On the contrary, coordinating a screen presentation with an oral presentation while attempting to keep the audience involved (or awake) and dealing with technical glitches on the fly only complicates the task.

As a telepromter. An inexperienced or nervous presenter might be tempted to read the slides verbatim as a telepromter—an excrutiatingly annoying practice to any audience—rather than use it as an outline of a more complete narrative.

Distorts preparation. Obsession with the appearance and "features" (see Gimmicks) of a slideshow can distort preparation if a presenter focuses disproportionately on creating the slideshow itself (especially one laden with effects) at the cost of thinking about and *rehears - ing* what he's going to say.

Discourages interaction. Slideshow presentations often represent presenter-centered, one-way communication. Where the lights are turned out, interaction with the audience is furthur put off or made awkward. Without interaction, then, the process becomes one of transferring information in one direction but without a suitably capable means of doing so: the information format is reductionist, the graphics simplified and low resolution.

Sells better than explains. The information design theorist Edward R. Tufte, in a stinging indictment of PowerPoint, suggests that imposing the bullet list format organizes information simplistically, defying analysis of complex relationships, and is suited to *selling* an idea but not *explaining* it.[1] The problem, he concludes, has to do with the relative "density" of information that can fit on a slide—a paucity—particularly on a generic PowerPoint template, compared to the printed page or even a Web page. (See table on page 5.)

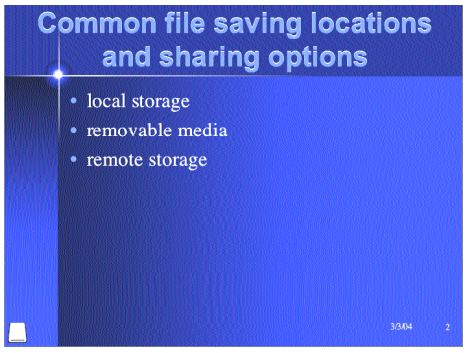
Reductive. The limited density inherent in slides, Tufte says, is compounded by "rules" that slideware proponents impose on users, codifying the maximum number of words on a line and lines on a slide and reducing all information, all analyses to hierarchical bullet lists written in a "choppy style that impedes understanding." The compressed phrasing of bullet lists leave out the narrative between the points that the presenter should supply but often doesn't.

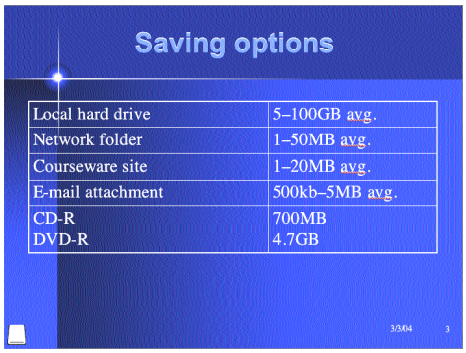
Fragmentation. Because each slide holds so little information, many slides must be used, fragmenting information and making comparisons or meaningful analyses of large amounts of data impossible. The greatest damage, therefore, results from the design of the software guiding or limiting what would otherwise be an analytical approach, rendering a presentation far less effective at transmitting information than one where a paper handout was distributed, which could display in one view much more information for comparison and analysis.

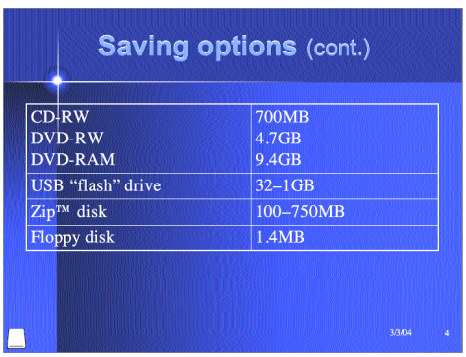
[1] Tufte, E.R., "The Cognitive Style of PowerPoint." Self-published monograph, 2003. www.edwardtufte.com.

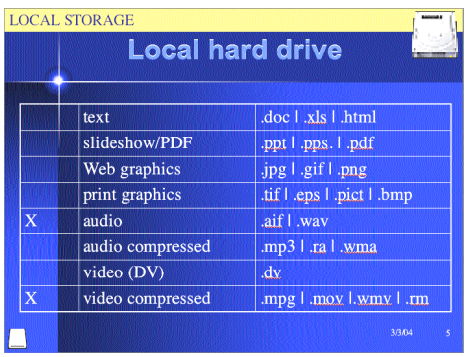
Information Density: Slides vs. a paper

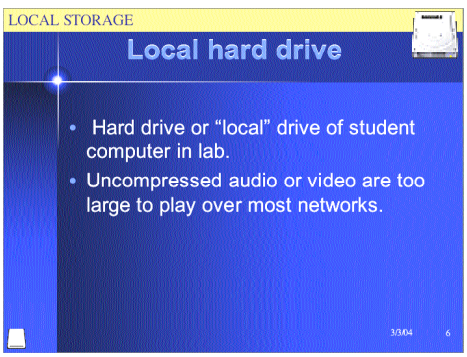
The table on the facing page (p. 5), comparing file saving options, would require at least 22 slides, a span in the display of information that would render a comprehensive comparison in a slideshow impractical if not impossible. Below are the first 6 slides of such a slideshow.











Appendix A — File saving and sharing options

Where saved/how shared		Media capacity	Practical for file types (with example file extensions)								Comments
			small files (typ.)			large files (typ.)					
		1000bytes=1kb 1000kb=1MB 1000MB=1GB	text (doc, rtf, html)	slideshow (ppt, pps) or PDF (pdf)	Web graphics (jpg, gif, png)	print graphics (tiff, eps, pict, bmp)	audio (aiff, wav)	audio compressed (mp3, ra, wma)	video (dv)	video compressed (mpg, mov, wmv, rm)	File types are matched not just to media that can hold them, but ones that are also the most practical for sharing information with a class. For example, though a text, slideshow, or PDF file would fit on a CD, that media is impractical for regularly distributing such files to a class.
local hard drive		5–100GB+ avg.					X		X		Hard drive or "local" drive of student computer in lab; uncompressed audio or video are too large to play over most networks.
network folder		1–50MB avg.	X	X	X	X		X		X	In a networked lab with a local file server, students access all but the largest files from individual or class folders.
courseware Web site		1–20MB avg.	X	X	X			X		X	Most efficient for small file distribution to students and among class, especially outside of class (distance learning).
E-mail attachment		0–5MB avg.	X	X	X						Fast and convenient for small files; E-mail accounts have small space quotas.
removable media	CD-R DVD-R	700MB 4.7GB					X	X	X DVD	X	These disks can only be written to once in a "session" (not a file at a time incrementally like other media). They require special disk "burning" software and can not be erased or rewritten.
	CD-RW DVD-RW DVD-RAM	700MB 4.7GB 9.4GB					X	X	X DVD	X	While burning these disks is awkward, as above, they can be erased completely and reused for subsequent session burnings (about 100 times). Not all DVD disk types are compatible with each other.
	USB flash drive	32MB–1GB	X	X	X	X	X	X		X	These key-size devices plug into any computer's USB port and appear as any other drive; compatible way to transport large files (except uncompressed video).
	Zip™ disk	100–750MB	X	X	X	X	X	X		X	The Zip and other high-capacity magnetic disks need a compatible drive in each computer where used, are expensive, bulky, and supported less and less.
	floppy disk	1.4MB	X	X	X						Too small and slow to be of wide use; phased out on many computers.

This table shows common file saving locations, including "removable media" (disks or drives that can easily move from one computer to another, e.g., CD, USB flash drive) and indicates common means of sharing documents, such as a text or audio file that a teacher creates and wants students to be able to access in class. The three letter "file extensions" (e.g., ".doc" for a Microsoft Word document) represent examples of common file types within each category.

Tips for Using PowerPoint for Academic Presentations

The slideshow is a visual supplement to your presentation, not the presentation itself. At best, it can only *help illustrate* your points, not give your presentation. If the audience is focussing on your slideshow, then they might be bored with you. *What* you say and *how* you say it is the main event. Be careful that your slideshow provides a visual supplement to what you say instead of limiting what you say or distracting you or your audience. Spend more time on what you plan to say than creating the slideshow. Most of these tips apply to any slideshow presentation program.

Content first

Write your **text** outline first, spell check it, and double-check the grammar. People will be looking at what you've written—because they'll have little else to do—and will notice any mistakes.

Don't get caught up with effects before finishing your text—if at all. Focus on **content before form**, just as in your writing in general.

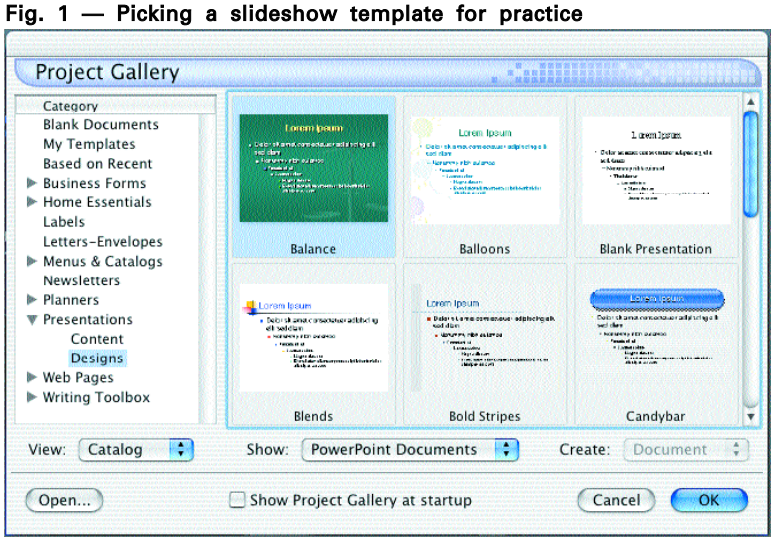
Your first slide should be a title slide and the last a closing slide, either may stay visible to your audience for considerably longer than any other slide. Make both informative and interesting.

A **title slide** should include your presentation title, your name, class information, and a graphic to stir interest (or text over a screen-filling graphic).

A **closing slide** should include your contact information and references for further information.

first *practice* slideshows using one of PowerPoint's built-in **templates**. While not ideal (they don't make good use of space), they offer sound design examples vis-à-vis color contrast of text and background and text size. When you become comfortable with making slides, create custom designs from "blank" slides that are more specifically suited to your subject and audience. New users without design experience making custom slides might make problematic style choices on their own at first.

Fig. 1 — Picking a slideshow template for practice



Mechanics

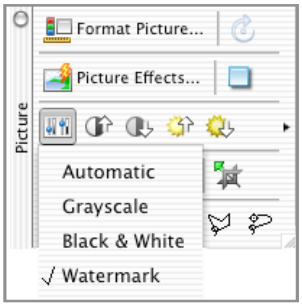
A slideshow is simply made up of a series of slides, and each slide has text objects and/or graphic objects arranged around each other or the text overlays (is on top of) a graphic.

Avoid the AutoContent Wizard, but create your

For objects or information that will repeat on every slide (e.g., slide number, date, title, author, company logo) use a master slide (**View** > **Master** > **Slide Master**). Each new slide will then contain those elements automatically.

For custom slide designs, if you use a background image on a master slide, apply the **Watermark** option on the image toolbar with the image se-

Fig. 2 — Applying a Watermark effect with the Picture Toolbar



lected (**Picture Toolbar** > **Image Control** > **Watermark**). The background image should not interfere with the readability of the foreground content. Resize the image to fit the entire slide. Crop if necessary.

For large presentations with several distinct **sections**, use a different color slide background for each section to distinguish them, such as different page or margin colors for chapters in a reference book.

PowerPoint applications of the same version are the **same on Macs and PCs**. It's the same file type. They are equally backwards compatible; that is, they can open documents created on either platform from earlier versions of PowerPoint.

On PCs, access common commands using the right mouse button. On Macs, access the same commands using the **Control** key with a mouse click.

Text

Text on a slide is much **larger** than printed text because it must be readable from a distance. Default sizes for text range from 44 points for headings to 28–20 for indented lists.

Use as much text as will fit on a slide at the font sizes PowerPoint gives you, enlarging the text box if necessary. Because of these space limitations, the list format may work better than prose but *only if the information is suitable to a list to begin with*. Unlike printed type, a slide for a presentation highlights facts, figures, and salient points illustrated with images, which you explain in more detail and connect with a narrative.

Adjust the **size** and **shape** of text boxes to accommodate the length of text contained within them and work around adjacent pictures, unless overlaying the graphic with the text. (If a graphic or text box has the text wrap feature enabled, then text automatically flows around it on the same line).

Don't use nonstandard **fonts**. PowerPoint is machine-dependent, which means that if you choose to use the font "Bodini MT Ultra Bold," then any computer that plays that slideshow will also have to have that font. If it doesn't, then it will substitute another and your layout will likely change. To be safe on a variety of computers, stick to the default PowerPoint fonts: Arial for headings and Times New Roman for lists or longer text.

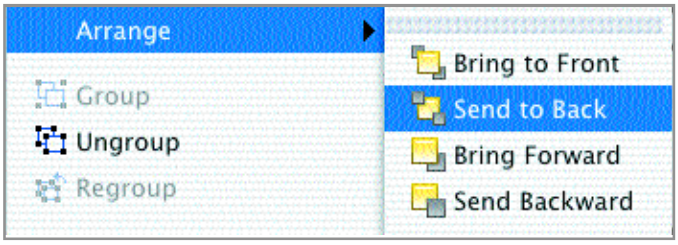
Graphics, animations, transitions

Use **relevant images**—staring at text alone on a slide is boring—but avoid the built-in clip art, which tend to be silly and unhelpful.

An image conveys far more information than text filling the same space. **Enlarge** important images to fill the entire slide rather than squeezing them in to accommodate text that's not critical to the point or doesn't need to be shown.

Text can overlay an image by adjusting its layer position to bring it to the front (**Draw** menu > **Order**). Graphic and text boxes each occupy a layer on the slide, the order of which can be changed—forward and backward.

Fig. 3 — Moving objects frontward or backward



The **lower left corner** of a slide may develop space for a small graphic (not clipart) when using text in indented lists, which move farther and farther to the right.

Resize graphics proportionally (changing height and width by the same percentage) using one of the four *corners* of the graphic box (see Fig. x). The resizing handles in the middle of the sides will only stretch the X axis (top, bottom) or Y axis (sides), thereby distorting the shape of the image.

Fig. 4 — Resizing vs. stretching an image

In general, **avoid animating** objects. Text cart wheeling onto the slide might be somewhat amusing once, but it distracts from your message. Animations also tend to look cooler on your computer screen than they do projected on a big screen before an audience. Use functional animation effects instead, such as a text box where successive bulleted items appear one at a time to coordinate with your talking about one before the next is introduced. Or, delay showing text or graphics on a slide for suspense or to allow the audience to guess or predict it.

If using **transitions** between slides, pick one that goes to the next slide quickly and stick with it. Using a different transition between every slide distracts from your message.

- a transition that opens up from the center, like a camera lens, opens up a new topic
- one that closes to the center ends a topic.
- simple right-to-left transitions ("push left" or "wipe left") simulate the turning of a page while clearly signaling that the slide has changed.

If you add sound to your presentation, you will need some way of **amplifying** it when you play it for a large audience. The computer running your presentation should have external speakers that can be aimed toward the audience. Sound files that play automatically when a slide appears may slow down your slideshow (how fast a slide loads and can be exited) and will increase its file size.

Printing/Saving

Save your presentation file early and often. The default saving format is "Presentation" (.ppt) which is an editable version. If you want to send a finished presentation to someone, use the "PowerPoint Show" (.pps) file type in the **Save As…** dialog box. The latter is read-only (cannot be modified) and opens automatically in slideshow mode (full screen).

Place-holder text is text on slides from built-in templates, e.g., "Click to add title," that you replace with your content. Place-holder text does not print; therefore, you don't have to delete the box if it's not being used.

To **practice your presentation** without a computer, print out the slides. Use the 4-up or 6-up printing option (under "Print What") to print 4 or 6 reduced—though still readable—slides per page to save paper and allow you to see the next slide while thinking about the current one. You can also print notes under each slide that do not appear in the slideshow.

Fig. 5 — Printing several slides to a page