

# #DeathByPowerpoint — ban the two title slides now

There is plenty of good advice on how to prepare a slide show, yet poorly crafted slides with multiple messages keep showing up. Let's start by ditching the two title slides once for all.

. . .

I said this before, the title of your paper is your billboard. My guesstimate is that for every 100 people who will read your titles, 10 will read the abstract, and perhaps only one will read the paper. Thus the importance of crafting an informative title that goes beyond generalities.

## Title

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- This is your billboard—most people will only read the title so give them useful information
- Assertive Statement Titles (ASTs)
- Good titles communicate the main finding
- Avoid uninformative boring titles like “Functional characterization of protein X...”
- AST: “Protein X contributes to [process] by doing this naughty thing to potato”



The title is your billboard. I said it and I say it again.

## Avoiding cognitive overload

Titles and headers do matter beyond papers. Think about your slide presentations. It's difficult for your audience to listen to you while reading what's on the slides, all while processing what can be complicated science. Most slides are displayed an average of 60 seconds.

What your audience does during that time is shuffle back and forth between reading and listening. Wordy slides will rarely get the message across. Things get even worse where the slides have multiple panels of text, images and graphs. What should the audience focus on? They can't read all of the text at once and digest the data points. Should they start at the top? That's probably where most people will first look at. But then sometimes there is nothing at the top of the slide. No title. Nothing. Or may be worse the title might be conveying obvious, somewhat useless information, therefore wasting valuable seconds of the audience attention.

Like every good title, the slide's title should convey a *unit of knowledge*, a knol—an assertive statement. Something that conveys the one and only message you want your audience to learn from that slide.

And if you're struggling to identify the one message to head your slide, then you have bigger problems. Usually, it means you're squeezing too much into the slide. You don't have material for just one slide but for more. This is the best clue you get to split the material into two or more slides. I use the titles to help me determine whether I'm stuffing too much in one slide.

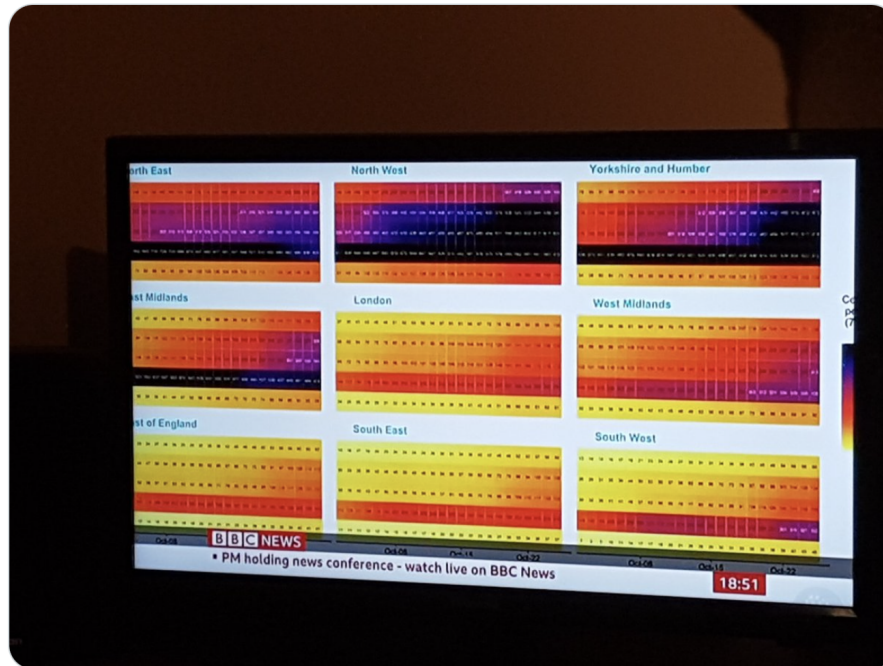
And don't give me the "I'm trying to keep my talk to under 15 slides" excuse. Not all slides are equal and cramming up several panels, multiple messages or animations into a single slide isn't the answer to shortening your talk. This isn't how you implement the one slide = one minute rule of thumb.



**Angus Malmgren**  
@AngusMalmgren



Nice to be able to see the entire plot...



#DeathByPowerpoint courtesy of UK Government. Note also the absence of a title.

**Sophien Kamoun**

@KamounLab · Follow



Replying to @AngusMalmgren

Ha ha I also flagged the same slide.

No title, small font, hidden legend and I just couldn't figure out what the different rows indicate... **#deathbypowerpoint** **#scicomfail**

With thanks to Angus Malmgren for spotting this during one of those epic UK government slide presentations during the COVID-19 pandemic. Note: this was intended to the general public.

## #DeathByPowerpoint

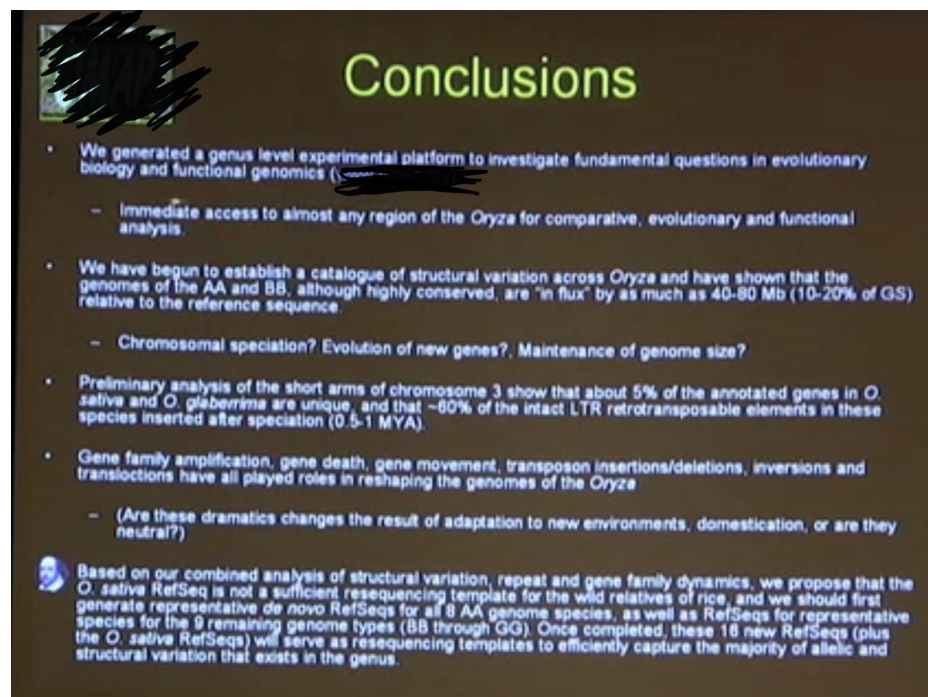
Let's leave the slide title for a minute. Twitter—that endless source of science humor—has plenty of powerpoint entertainment. Hashtag

#DeathByPowerpoint is a good launchpad for some good laughs.



I spent about 10 minutes scanning science conference talks on YouTube for poorly crafted slides. I wasn't disappointed. It took me just a few minutes to dig out the major types of poor slides.

*The text overload.* Can anyone possibly read this while listening to the speaker?



The text overload. (Source: YouTube)

*The uber-detailed figure.* Yes, this is a very impressive pipeline, but can anyone really get the details from the slide, especially when sitting in the back of the room? Appropriate for a paper, but as a slide?



The uber-detailed figure. (Source: YouTube)

*The overwhelming bullet point list.* Can anyone read all 10 bullet points while listening to the speaker?

#### From: Ten Simple Rules for Reproducible Computational Research

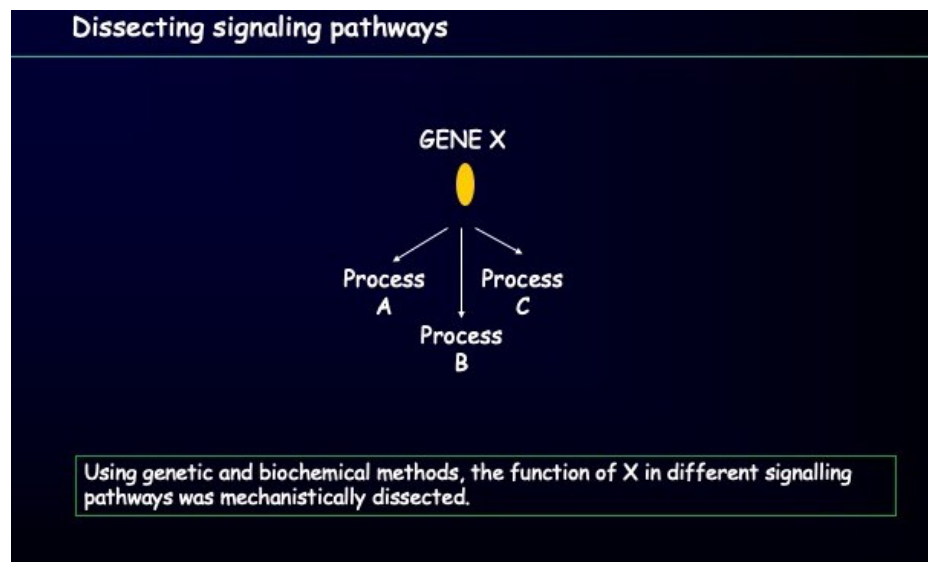
- **Rule 1: For Every Result, Keep Track of How It Was Produced**
- Rule 2: Avoid Manual Data Manipulation Steps
- **Rule 3: Archive the Exact Versions of All External Programs Used**
- **Rule 4: Version Control All Custom Scripts**
- **Rule 5: Record All Intermediate Results, When Possible in Standardized Formats**
- Rule 6: For Analyses That Include Randomness, Note Underlying Random Seeds
- **Rule 7: Always Store Raw Data behind Plots**
- Rule 8: Generate Hierarchical Analysis Output, Allowing Layers of Increasing Detail to Be Inspected
- **Rule 9: Connect Textual Statements to Underlying Results**
- **Rule 10: Provide Public Access to Scripts, Runs, and Results**

The overwhelming bullet point list. (Source: YouTube)

**Why two titles?**

The two titles slide is a common error that's simple to fix. I understand that everyone cannot be an engaging speaker, but there is no excuse for having poor slides. Start by making sure your slides follow the basic rules.

The “Type 2” error pops up regularly when we run mock talks in the lab. Here is a representative example I made up.



The two title slide. Why two titles?

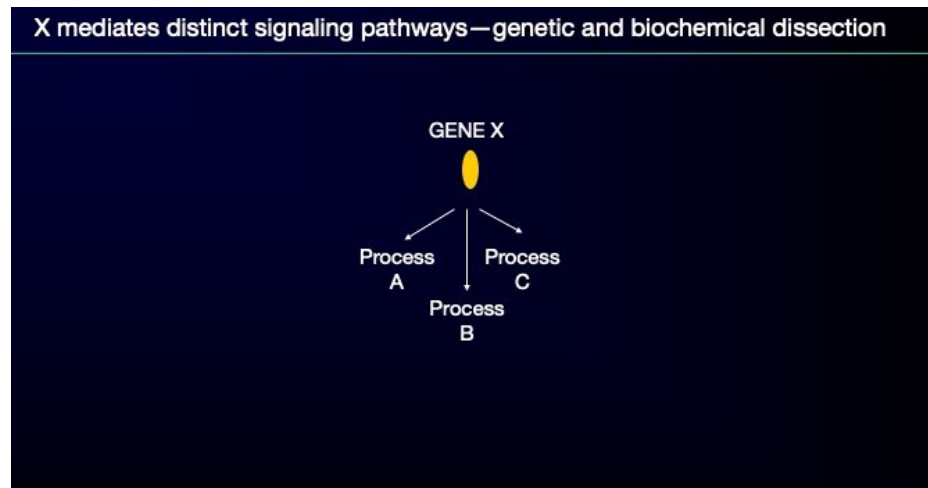
Why two titles is the puzzling question. My guess is that there is a tendency to have the main conclusion at the bottom of the slide because this is the narrative the speaker has in mind. The story will go like this: we dissected the pathways of gene X, we used this type of methods and approaches, then we concluded that X functions in these three pathways. The conclusion is left to the end.

But is that the best way to tell a science story? Although it can be a useful strategy at times to lead your audience to a certain conclusion, I wouldn't abuse this narrative style. I wouldn't repeatedly structure every slide as a mystery novel and leave the conclusion to the end. Say whodunnit right at the start, in the title. Then, tell them how you got there.

The title above is pointless. “Dissecting signaling pathways” is a waste of valuable real estate on the slide. It doesn't convey much to the audience. It will waste a few of their seconds, while only telling them what they probably already know that you study “signaling pathways”.



The solution is always simple—which is why there is absolutely no excuse for the Type 2 error. Just move the conclusion to the title. Et voilà! Look how uncluttered the slide became and how sharp the assertive statement title is. Even if your audience switches off, stops listening to you, can't hear you or get distracted with their smartphone, a simple glance at the screen will tell them what you want them to know from this slide. Mission accomplished. Your slide passes the glance test.



A one title slide that passes the glance test.

### Use the first sentence to introduce the paragraph

Note that the Type 2 error creeps up in academic writing too. Don't structure your papers like a mystery novel. You should say whodunnit several times in the title, abstract, introduction etc.

A related issue I often find myself editing is when the conclusion is at the end of a paragraph. A great writing #ProTip is to use the first sentence to introduce the paragraph to the reader. If they're interested, they'll read the rest. If not, they got the point and can move on to the next paragraph.

## Use the first sentence to introduce the paragraph

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- Results - “To determine whether Phytophthora gene X is expressed during potato infection, we performed gene expression analyses...”
- Discussion - “Why does Phytophthora have sixty five copies of gene X?”
- Discussion - “Compared to other eukaryotes, Phytophthora has an unusually large number of copies of gene X.”

Use the first sentence to introduce the paragraph. (Source: Don't perish! A step by step guide to writing a scientific paper.)

### The problem with academic science talks

I'd love to hear your views on why so many academic slides are poor. It seems inexcusable that poor slides like the ones above remain common despite the many discussions on the topic and opportunities for learning simple tips for crafting good slides. The problem may reside in the inherent conflict of interest created by the peer-review system that dominates academic culture and psyche. Too often, academics give talks not to communicate clear take home messages to their audience, but to impress potential paper and grant reviewers. The goal is to impress peers with quantity when a new concept or two will do.

There is confusion about why we give talks. I can't think of any other good reason.

### Acknowledgements

Apologies to all those who inspired this post. If it's any consolation, I found quite a few poor slides among my own ppt files 🤖. We learn and grow.

There are excellent tips and advice on how to prepare a good slide show. These are a few examples.



**Tessa Davis**   
@TessaRDavis · [Follow](#)



Most PowerPoint presentations suck.

But yours doesn't have to be one of them.

Here are 10 simple rules to 10x your next presentation:

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NOT to do When Creating  
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Google Slide Shows*

### Do Your Slides Pass the Glance Test?

ZargonDesign/Getty Images An audience can't listen to your presentation and read detailed, text-heavy slides at the...

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