Write Good Slide Titles

Idea In Short

Consulting presentations live or die by their slide titles. Write titles that stand alone, tell a story together, match page content, stay consistent and take a clear point of view.

Consultants Live in PowerPoint

Consultants use PowerPoint almost to the point of parody. Some turn it on first thing in the morning. This makes sense because consultants are in the business of turning the complex into the simple. They put things into buckets, and individual deck pages force focus, format, narrative and sequence. Amazon does not allow PowerPoint in executive meetings because Jeff Bezos believes it over-simplifies messages. That is exactly why management consultants use PowerPoint, for good and not evil.

The two elements that carry a presentation are the executive summary and the titles. A presentation review with a principal typically follows a pattern. The principal listens to the consultant's summary for two or three minutes. Then she reads the executive summary on the first page closely like a hawk. Then she rapidly flows through the pages like a river, reading only the titles.

This review pattern reveals something fundamental about how executives consume information. They do not read decks linearly from start to finish. They scan for the argument, test the logic and probe where they disagree. Titles that fail this scan doom the entire presentation to irrelevance, regardless of how brilliant the underlying analysis might be. The principal's rapid flow through titles is not laziness but efficiency, and consultants who design for this reading pattern win.1

The Executive Summary Sets the Stage

In business presentations, the answer comes first. Executives are busy and impatient. The summary foreshadows the structure of the presentation by outlining the buckets. This gives the client control to direct the conversation to the parts they most want to discuss. Most importantly, it ensures all arguments see the light of day before the meeting gets cut short, derailed or hijacked. As a senior manager once said, make sure your first page is perfect.

The executive summary serves as a contract between presenter and audience. It promises what the deck will deliver and sets expectations for the discussion. When the summary is weak or vague, the audience loses trust before the presentation even begins. A strong summary demonstrates command of the material and respect for the reader's time.

Sometimes you never get past the first page, and that can be fine. The client may already agree with your conclusions and recommendations. They may have been kept up to date through executive status reports. The consultant may have done the requisite pre-wiring and consensus-building so nothing is new. The client trusts you.

Titles Must Stand Alone

This seems obvious, but bad PowerPoints are everywhere. If your cousin who knows nothing about the topic read the slide title, would it make sense? Would it spark interest and let them almost guess what else appears on the slide? Always have someone proofread your work before sending it to your senior manager or client. When that person reads the titles, they should make sense without extra explanation. If they give you a confused look, redo the titles.2

Titles Tell a Story Together

Think of PowerPoint slides like scenes in a movie. When Martin Scorsese lays out a storyboard, there is a reason for each scene. The sequence matters, the angle matters, the sound matters and the transition matters. If you are a consultant, you have had a boss or client read only the titles of your presentation. It is dismissive but super common. At a minimum, make sure the titles work together to tell a narrative.

This approach also serves as a smart way to kick-start the storyboard. You do not need a computer to storyboard. Use a pen and notepad to draft titles in sequence before building slides.

Match Content, Stay Consistent and Be Direct

No matter how good the title, it tells only part of the story. You need logic, analysis and proof. The bullet points, charts, tables, graphics, interview comments and screenshots should support your title. Good practice involves turning on the voice recorder and going through the presentation as if the client sat in front of you. If you find yourself phrasing things differently or skipping content, something is wrong with that slide. Redo it.

Consistency matters. You want feng shui with your slides so they look like the same person wrote them. Consultants typically divide work among several team members and cobble slides together later. It becomes problematic if the length, wording, syntax and point of view of titles are inconsistent. If your titles run two lines, stick to that. If you use a period at the end of titles, do it for all of them. If you use past tense, stay consistent. Do not distract the reader with inconsistency.3

Be Direct and Have a Point of View

Executives are busy, so get to the point. If Selling, General and Administrative (SG&A) costs are up 15% while revenues are down 6%, say that. Do not hedge. When possible, drive to insights and back them with data. Answer the question so what. If a slide does not say much, merge it with another slide, send it to the appendix or delete it. If it bores you, it will bore your client.

Clients and bosses did not hire you to summarize information. That is what Wikipedia is for. They want your ability to do balanced research, think through implications and distill data to its essence. They want you to persuade them without misleading them. Consider an example from a Wall Street Journal article about the coronavirus economic reopening. Three slide titles might read: the reopening will be fitful, fragile and partial over six months. There is a lack of coordinated governmental guidance and nationwide testing. As a result, companies and municipalities must develop individual solutions. The first title serves as the main point. The second answers why. The third answers so what and adds a point of view.

Titles with a point of view demonstrate that the consultant has done the thinking, not just the data gathering. They signal intellectual ownership of the recommendation. When a title merely describes what appears on the slide, it abdicates this responsibility and forces the reader to draw conclusions independently. The best titles do the analytical work for the reader while remaining defensible against scrutiny.

- 1Ultimate Guide to Consulting PowerPoint Slides
- 2Executive Summary in PowerPoint Examples
- 3How to Write an Executive Summary Like McKinsey

Summary

Titles are the most important part of every slide. Executives often read only the titles, so craft them to stand alone, connect as a narrative and drive directly to insights with a point of view.