Book Review: The Non-Designer's Presentation Book: Principles for Effective Presentation Design (*Peachpit Press*, 2010)

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In classrooms and at conferences, 'PowerPoint' has become almost a dirty word. It is viewed by many as a necessary evil, a crutch to help presenters remember what they need to say or to provide visuals for what they are talking about. As author and experienced presenter Robin Williams (no, not that Robin Williams!) points out, though, PowerPoint is just a tool; if a presentation is awful, that is the fault of the speaker, not of the tool. In *The Non-Designer's Presentation Book*, Williams takes the principles from her bestselling book *The Non-Designer's Design Book* (first published in 1994, with two updated editions since then) and applies them to the creation of slides.

Williams' central argument is that a speaker's credibility is not merely dependent upon "the strength of her prepared arguments, but on the audience's perceptions of the speaker" (p. 1). For example, the presence of typos or grammar errors on one's slides will undermine even the most dynamic speaker's authority. Additionally, YOU as the speaker are the most important part of your presentation; slides should "enhance your talk, not...do it for you" (p. 4). The first step in this process is to decide whether a slide show is really even the best presentation method for the audience and content; if it is, interactive elements should be incorporated as much as possible. The intent of *The Non-Designer's Presentation Book* is to help readers create the best digital presentation when that is the necessary format, so a brief comparison of one's digital presentation software options (circa late 2009) is provided. The book was published just after the launch of Prezi, so no mention is made of this flexible Web-based presentation tool. But if looking at the presentation materials posted for the most recent LOEX, WILU, ACRL and other library conferences are any indication, the tool people, by far, are most likely to use is PowerPoint (or some other slide-based presentation software) and this book directly applies to that situation. It mainly focuses on Microsoft PowerPoint and Apple's Keynote, the two leading slide-based software applications, and includes step-by-step instructions on how to optimally tweak their default settings.

While the book is not geared towards any particular industry, Williams advocates sound pedagogical principles that educators should already be familiar with, if not in this context. One should start the process of creating a presentation through reflective practice, taking notes on what's made presentations one has been to in the past either good or bad. "By taking the time to formulate words and pinpoint the issues [rather than just thinking 'It's boring'], you can avoid doing the annoying things" (p. 11). Key concepts (e.g., the fewer the words on a slide, the better) are repeated judi-ciously throughout the volume, modeling effective teaching practice. Readers are reminded that the point of all this work is not just to make one's slides pretty, but to communicate more clearly: "If your presentation is more visually pleasing, people are more likely to look at your slides instead of their text messages" (p. 76). And something all educators should remember, regardless of whether they use slides when teaching, is that "no one in your audience is going to remember *everything* you say, and actually, the less you say, the more they will remember" (p. 25; emphasis Williams').

While a book is a different medium than a presentation—one where there is a much larger text:space ratio—in this particular book there are many visuals and wide margins, and concepts are limited to one per page. Williams practices what she preaches. Additionally, the book's most helpful aspect is that it provides many pictorial examples of what to do and what not to do (for instance, Figure 1). She also writes in an engaging, informal (but still professional) style that connects with the reader (e.g., regarding a "what not to do" set of slides: "Wimpy. Sorry, but these are just wimpy slides. Why are the images so small? Why is the text so cowardly? Please don't make me use binoculars!") (p. 82), making this already short book a quick read. Helpful extras include exercises for each main topic and a list of sources for purchasing fonts, videos, and sounds, which she greatly encourages because it adds drama and visual interest. The cost of these items ranges from free to $39, so at least it some cases, it should be readily possible to pursue some of these presentation-software improvements, even if readers' employers are not willing to bankroll such expenditures. As librarians, the vast majority of what we teach is utilized multiple times across a significant time period, so the purchase of these materials should be considered an investment.

As an information literacy instructor who uses PowerPoint extensively, I too have fallen into the trap of quickly throwing together some slides, focusing more on the content ("Did I explain that assignment carefully enough?") than on design. I always put some thought into the attractiveness of the slides—I know, for example, not to use garish pictures as backgrounds—but usually did not have enough time to fine-tune what I considered mere aesthetics. After reading this book, I now realize that the design of my slides may well have been interfering with my students' ability to absorb their content. I intend to revise my slide decks for each of the topics I teach by, for example, reducing the number of words on each slide, and by correcting the alignment and increasing contrast between slide elements.

The entirety of this book is strongly recommended reading for any librarian who uses presentation software, whether for one-shots or for-credit information literacy courses, or for presentations at a conference. Even educators with a surfeit of presentation experience are guaranteed to learn something new from this book.

References

Williams, R. (1994). *The Non-Designer's Design Book: Design and Typographic Principles for the Visual Novice.* Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Education.

Figure 1: One of many visual examples from the book, along with the text about the picture
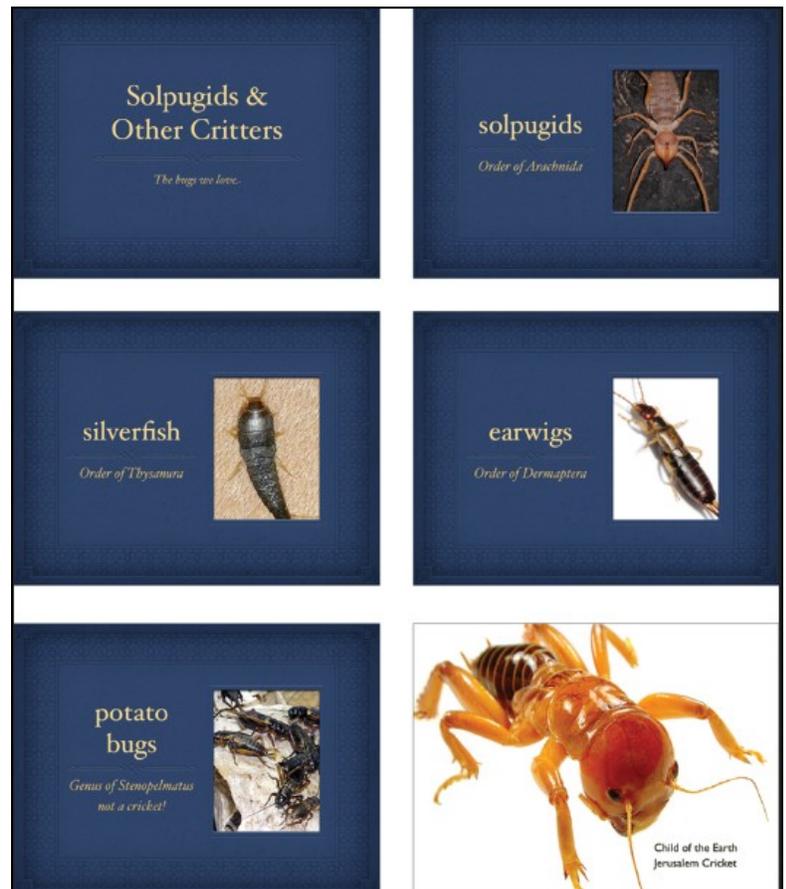
By its very nature, contrast calls attention to itself. You have surely been (or can imagine being) in a place where the way you look is very different from all those around you—even though you may be a very ordinary person amongst your own kind, you stand out in some places by contrast. It's pretty much the same in a slide-show, so take advantage of that. For instance, perhaps you are going along talking, talking, talking, showing your slides, and there's something coming up that is so stunning that you really want your audience to sit up and take notice—give it a re-markable contrast.

You can imagine sitting in a darkened room looking at small bugs and then—kapow—the most Magnificent Insect of All appears on the screen, hugely.

- Picture and text from pg84

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1. Keep it small. Jigsaw is intended for groups of three to six, and that is wise: a large group is not as effective, as it increase the chance of students not participating.

2. Prep is key. This lesson, as I mentioned before, requires a large amount of prep work. However, once you have successfully created one jigsaw, it is easy to create others.

3. Jump on in. In this lesson plan, a majority of the learning responsibility is placed on the students. Although you have identified the research tools and sample search strategies, it is up to the students to teach each other the similarities and differences. You should be prepared to actively participate in order to correct misconceptions or mistakes. Also, students are often absent, leaving some groups without representatives for a particular research tool. As a result, you may need to step in as the "expert" for one or two.

4. Venture outside your comfort zone. This approach is a great way to try something new in your classroom. Embrace it. Remember, it is only a pilot.

References

Collins III, J.W., & O'Brien, N.P. (EDs.). (2003). *The greenwood dictionary of education*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press.