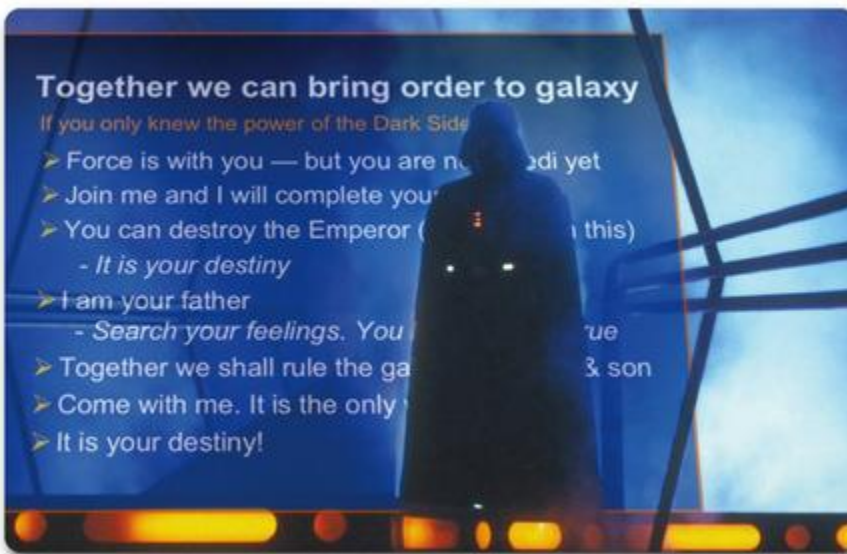


## More "Teaching Tidbits" from the NYLS Initiative for Excellence in Law Teaching (IELT)!



## Improving Your In-Class Visual Presentations

The Intergalactic Empire Builders here at the IELT DeathStar™ know that visual technology and PowerPoint can be powerful learning tools to help students acquire, remember, organize, and access information. Yet we're intimidated -- our students have grown up in a world of BuzzFeed quizzes and learning from YouTube videos. Indeed, many of them have been routinely exposed to visual presentation technology since grade school, and are much better at using it than we are. We worry that, from their perspective, our PowerPoints usually look something like this...



We've canvassed some of the literature on visual design and identified a few ideas that have been helpful as we slowly try to move away from our Darth Vader-like addiction to bullet points. Please note that these are absolutely NOT "hard and fast" rules. Like so much of what we tell our students, mastery comes from exercising judgment about when to apply various rules and when to seek out other alternatives. Our goal is much more modest: to offer a few things to reflect on if you are using PowerPoint in a law school classroom.

## Less is More

Students, like all of us, have limited cognitive capacity. The more words you put on a slide, the more time they will spend copying down what they are reading rather than encoding and understanding the

information. We can easily overwhelm their circuits and detract from the live classroom conversation if we commit one of several all-too-tempting sins: putting too many words on a slide, using too much movement (through animation or slide transitions), using images that distract from or are unrelated to your teaching goals, or by using templates with too many colors. Remember -- we want our visuals to reinforce the central messages we're communicating in class, and when students are spending too much time paying attention to the PowerPoint, they aren't paying attention to you. And PowerPoint was not designed to replace lecture notes or detailed in-class handouts.

We've seen a few rules of thumb to help us keep our classroom slides simple:

**Keep it Short.** Try limiting yourself to no more than 3 lines of text with no more than 6 words per line.

**Cut the Action.** Eliminate or limit animation for slide transitions and objects on a slide. When a student is paying attention to movement on the slide, they aren't paying attention to you, and it's all too easy to find animations distracting.

**One Image Per Slide.** Limit the number of images per slide to avoid cognition overload.

It's a challenge, and for some legal materials, it might be impossible, but we encourage you to experiment with the idea that "less is more."

## **Color and Font**

We sometimes have a tendency to assume that because something looks clear on our computer monitor when we design it, it will look equally clear when it's projected in a classroom with florescent lighting. Unfortunately, that isn't always the case, and we often produce slides that are almost impossible to read. Here are a few tips to improve the look of your slides:

**Font Size.** As a rule, we try to never use a font size lower than 30, and usually shoot for at least 36 point. Run out of room? Try using multiple slides!

**Color.** Most of the "experts" suggests using "cool colors" for slide backgrounds, like shades of dark blue or green, and to try and avoid "hot" background colors like red or orange. Use contrasting colors for the text and to emphasize critical language. In general, dark backgrounds with light writing tend to be stronger and easier to read than black lettering on white backgrounds.

**Visual Cues.** Visual cues can help learners focus on the most important content. On a detailed slide, try highlighting or placing the most important portions of the text in a shaded text box. We've found this particularly helpful when asking students to work with detailed statutory language or a lengthy quote from a case.

**Try it Out.** Put up one of your PowerPoint slides and sit in the back row of your classroom with all the lights on. Do you need to squint to read it? If so, imagine what's happening to your students...

**Lighting.** In order to make your slides visible to the whole class, consider adjusting the lighting setting in your classroom to "Video High." This turns down the overhead lighting in front of the screen, reducing glare without dramatically reducing the overall light in the room.

## **Images**

Pictures and images can help students retain information because memory resides in our ability to make connections. A well-chosen image -- that is, one that strongly relates to the *concept* you're trying to explain -- helps students encode information by creating a connection between that images

and an idea. On the other hand, an irrelevant image can create confusion and actually harm the student's ability to understand and retain the information. Choose images that are relevant and help to reinforce the core concept you're trying to communicate. A wide range of free stock photos are available [here](#). And image quality matters; even if you can't tell the difference, chances are your students can.

If you're a heavy user of images, we also recommend becoming familiar with a key concept in visual composition: the "rule of thirds." There's more information [here](#) if you're interested.

## **Turn It Off**

We've found that one way to focus student attention on your words (instead of your slides) is to hit the letter "B" during the presentation, which darkens the screen. Hit "B" again, and your presentation will magically return.

## **Keep Working at It**

If you're interested in learning more about improving your PowerPoint presentations, we're big fans of [Presentation Zen](#). And there's a ton of advice about effective PowerPoint use in university classrooms [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#).

Good luck, and happy teaching!

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