Making PowerPoint Presentations Accessible for Blind or Visually-impaired Students

Many faculty members use MS PowerPoint to create presentations for classroom and online instruction. PowerPoint is a useful tool for communication, but poses some specific problems for accessibility, particularly for blind or visually-impaired students.

There are some additional difficulties in using PowerPoint for the Mac, with versions prior to PowerPoint 2011. The more recent version of PowerPoint (PowerPoint 2011) allows you to enter Alternative Text (alt text), a necessary step for accessibility for blind or visually-impaired students. Unfortunately, even the most recent version of PowerPoint for the Mac does not have the capacity for creating PDF documents with tags, so an alternative must be found for that use.

Here we consider three aspects of using PowerPoint for instruction, and methods for enhancing the accessibility of the resulting materials: Part I, The Presentation Itself; Part II, Handouts for Presentations; and Part III, Making PowerPoint Presentations Accessible for the Web. The following section shows how to use the Check Accessibility option in more recent versions of MS PowerPoint for Windows.

Recommendations for Making Accessible Presentations

Part I – Slide Design

1. **Give each slide a title.**
Enter the title in the area designated by the slide design. This will help generate a table of contents for screen readers. Each slide should have a unique title.

2. **Simple designs are best.**
   - Use a non-cluttered design template (such as Orbits or Refined).
   - Color choices should provide strong contrast. For projected presentations, it’s better to use light text on a dark background (yellow on black or dark gray, white on dark blue, etc.).
   - Do not convey information with color alone.

3. **Use easy-to-read, sans serif fonts. Examples: Arial or Verdana.**

Part II – Slide Content

1. **Limit the number of bullet points and total quantity of text per slide.**
   For projected presentations, 5-7 bullets per slide and 5 words per bullet,

2. **Avoid the use of tables, or if necessary, use the MS Word tool to create tables.**
   Be sure to label headings for rows and columns.

3. **Use Alt-Text**
   Verbally describe all graphics including tables, charts, and images during presentation. Shapes (e.g., rectangles and ovals) should have alt-text. Screen readers won’t read Word Art.

Clicking on the Expand Menu icon in the Picture Tools tab in PowerPoint (see red oval, above) will open the Format Picture window. Select “Alt Text” to access the window for entering a description of what’s in the picture in your PowerPoint presentation. This description will be available for screen readers.

4. **Make sure hypertext links are descriptive about what you’re linking to.**
   Don’t just use the URL or http: address. Describe the Web page you’re linking to.

5. **Check the order of slide elements**
   Use the Arrange tools in PowerPoint to make sure slide elements are arranged in proper order for a screen reader. In the Home tab, open the Selection Pane by selecting it in the Arrange pull-down menu.
In the Selection Pane in MS PowerPoint for Windows, items are listed in reverse order. The bottom-most item in the Selection Pane is read first. In this example, the slide title will be read first.

You can change the order of elements (the order in which screen readers will read them). Select an element and move it up or down in the list by clicking on the Up or Down buttons at the bottom of the Selection Pane.
Part III – Slide Transitions

Indicate slide transitions by associating sound effects with them. A recurring sound effect will signal blind or visually impaired audience members when you are moving to a new slide.

In the Transitions tab in PowerPoint, there is a pull-down menu for Sounds to associate with slide transitions. Click on the downward pointing arrow to open the menu, then scroll down to make your selection. For example, add the “Whoosh” sound effect for transitions by clicking on it in the pull-down menu.

For more information, visit the “PowerPoint Tips” page at the Accessibility Website at Penn State University:

http://accessibility.psu.edu/microsoftoffice/powerpoint/
Use “Check Accessibility” for MS PowerPoint Presentations

From the File tab in PowerPoint, there is the option to Check for Issues as you Prepare for Sharing.

Click on the Check for Issues button, which will open a pull-down menu.
The resulting screen will show you your Inspection Results, and Additional Information that you may find helpful for revising your presentation.