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CSI: PowerPoint Reuse Design Crimes

By James Theall, CEO, SlideManager

On the popular TV show CSI, forensic scientists are called in to gather evidence about a crime and draw conclusions about who did what to whom. While PowerPoint slide formatting crimes are not nearly as serious or gruesome as those on TV, the results are sometimes just as painful to people who manage corporate presentation content.

Ninety-eight percent of organizations in the world share and reuse PowerPoint content for custom sales pitches, marketing communications, investor relations or training. Within the 30 million PowerPoint presentations given every day, many of the slides can be formatted for reuse, saving precious time and money. Those of you who work for these organizations have seen slide formatting issues that we will solve in this article.



When you copy slides from one show to another and see text explode and run off the page, colors unpredictably change, graphics move from where they were placed, or logos suddenly become obscured, you have experienced the crime - PowerPoint's 'formatting issue.'

Formatting issues are the bane of organizations that share and reuse slide content. Marketing and design departments often end up re-creating slides rather than attempting to correct formatting issues in existing content. And presenters get frustrated waiting for content or having to fix un-readable slides themselves when they would rather be rehearsing their presentation or working with clients. The root problem is that PowerPoint was designed for individuals, not enterprise wide sharing; further, most training programs focus on how you can create presentations for yourself, not for sharing with your company. The good news is that PowerPoint is very capable of supporting enterprise use and these issues can be avoided in the first place if a few simple rules are followed.

Let's create a slide crime scene with an extreme example of formatting issues that arise when people share content. We'll then bring our PowerPoint CSI team to investigate the crime. The SlideManager team has working with PowerPoint and developing presentation management software since 1987 so we have seen millions of slides created by thousands of slide builders with varying degrees of knowledge, expertise and training. At one point we felt like we had seen it all and created a training program called 'How to correct the top 10 PowerPoint gotchas.' However, with each new client we discover that people who build slides are constantly finding new and more sophisticated ways to create PowerPoint crimes. The slides shown below are an example of the most common non-dynamic slide design issues we see. Many of them may be familiar to you or people you work with.

Before we investigate the crime scene, it's important to point out that PowerPoint has a strong, albeit obscure defense. PowerPoint provides many tools and features that make slides dynamic during reuse, but we find that people either ignore them or don't understand how to use them. . In the example below, using the **Reapply Layout** or insert **Slides from Files with retained formatting** features, while powerful and often the correct solution to formatting issues, do not help here. They make the slide look even worse.

Reapply Layout will force the text with mixed font sizes to use the font size of the master placeholder for all characters on the slide. This exacerbates the overflow issue rather than solving it. In addition, Reapply layout does not like mixed font sizes and adjusts font size on slides to match the master placeholder. In this example, inserting the slides from the first file with original formatting would defeat the objective of changing branding with a new design template.

Slide 1: The innocent looking 'before' slide



This slide looked well formatted with its original design

Slide 2: The crime scene with its new design template.



Let's start collecting evidence and identify what happened to this slide when it was added to a presentation with a different design template. Once we sift through the evidence, we will understand the problem and can recommend ways to avoid it. This discovery process may get a little technical,

but bear with me because the results will afford you many new tools for improving your enterprise PowerPoint practices.

A. Slide Title Evidence

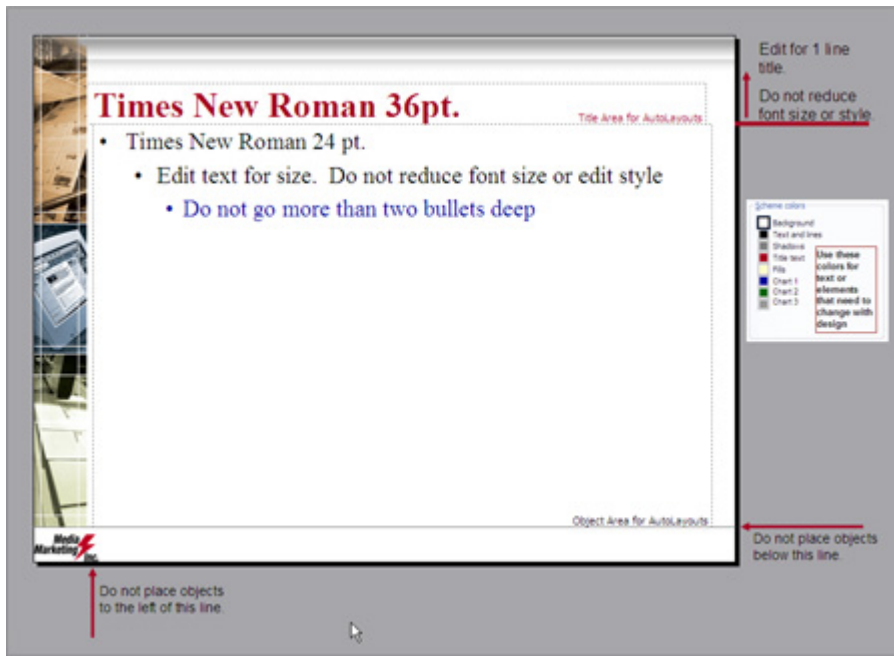
- The slide title uses a **Title Text Scheme Color** that was mapped to the **Color Scheme** of the first design. Because of which, it was dynamic and updated, using the corresponding scheme color of the new **Design Template**. This may have just been lucky as you will soon learn.
- The **Font** and **Font Size** did not update to the specs of the new design, yet the **Font Style and Effects** did.
- The font 'Segoe' is the same in the two slides but the **Placeholder** from the **Slide Master** of the second slide is 'Arial.'
- The font sizes for the titles of both slides do not match and neither matches their respective placeholder.
- The evidence of the crime is that the design template of the first slide uses 'Times Roman' for its title field placeholder while the slide builder edited the text on slide content layer to 'Segoe.' This is why in the updated slide the font 'stuck' and did not update to the second design template's 'Arial' font.
- Furthermore, the font size was also altered on the first slide so it no longer matched the placeholder of the design template. This caused the font size to also stick and not update to the font size of the second design.

RULE: *If you want text to be dynamic, always use the design template to adjust font types. Changes on the slide content layer make slide non-dynamic because the font type "sticks" and will not properly update with future design template changes.*

RULE: *If you want font sizes to be predictable remember that PowerPoint does not store the font size of your slide content. It stores the ratio between the slide master placeholder and the slide content field. While every other graphics program stores the exact point size, PowerPoint uses this ratio method, which many people find extremely confusing. In this case the font size of the title (in addition to containing mixed sizes) is different in the slide field of both slides and doesn't match either of the master placeholders. But the ratios are exactly the same.*

- The Text Alignment of the first slide is aligned left and the second slide is centered. This shows that the alignment is dynamic. While this is what we want, the second slide looks ugly with the title text flowing off the top of the slide.
- If your presenters will have the choice of more than one template then you should consider a few Corporate Design Standards for consistent look and branding; however, the alignment itself is not the problem.
- The real problem is that the title contains a Hard Return to make the first slide for design aesthetic reasons. The hard return means that the text does not flow and wraps on three lines rather than the two due to the increase in the font size of the second design.

RULE: *I understand that creative license and flexibility are important to designers, but they need to understand the implications of decisions such as using hard returns when future font attributes and placeholder sizes change may change. 'Design latitude.' is especially important if it increases the impact or understanding of the story. However, in order to assure predictable slide behavior in all future uses of your slides, it will be crucial that you choose to apply a few basic standards to either your design templates or content level design changes. We recommend organizations define corporate standards for placeholder size, position, workspace and font sizes across all design templates. If, on the other hand, design flexibility is your priority, then content level standards should be established. We find placing simple notes, guides and color scheme maps for your standards directly on the design template outside the template's print and viewing area is a great way to provide easy reference for these standards.*



Now let's move from the slide title to collect evidence from the rest of the slide.

B, C, D, E: Slide Content Evidence

This content area displays many issues. While we don't need to analyze all of them, we will pick the most heinous. Our theory is that most of these problems were caused because the designer was unable to find an exact **Slide Layout** containing two sets of alternating text and illustrations. We assume they instead chose a layout that had some of the elements they needed and then improvised the rest...causing inconsistent object behavior. Now let's collect the evidence and prove our case.

- Our PowerPoint forensic experts determined that the designer chose a **Text and Content Layout** that contained most of the placeholders they wanted. They then created a **Text Box** of their own to provide another container for text.
- Our evidence also points to a theory that they rearranged placeholders and text boxes where they wanted them and thought they were safe.

But, the laws of PowerPoint slide reuse behavior are very clear...

- If you move the position of a text field or content container from the position of its master placeholder, it sticks when a new design template is used and will not move to the location of the new master placeholder.
- If you use the layout feature to reapply the slide layout, then all objects are returned to the original position of the master placeholder, ignoring where you positioned them. While the layout objects have this dynamic behavior, manually created objects always remain where they are placed.
- If a placeholder is formatted in the design template's slide master with bulleted text, then even if the bullets are removed on the slide, they will return if you reapply the layout.
- If fonts or font sizes are adjusted on the slide layer they stick when a new template is used or are returned to their placeholder size when a layout is reapplied...even if the font size was reduced by the auto fit feature.
- Layouts with multiple content objects divide and proportionately share the position of the Slide Master's bullet text field. The formula used by PowerPoint to position master objects ignores other objects on the slide. When you apply a layout, placeholder objects are returned to their original position

RULE: Placeholders are a powerful feature if you understand their behavior and the implications of changing their attributes on the slide content layer or reusing slides with different design templates. If you want your slide designs to be 100% dynamic, then you must not allow design changes or re-positioning of placeholder objects on the slide content layer. If you do not find a slide layout that exactly matches your design, you should understand that new design templates will move placeholder master objects but not the content you create on your own. If you cannot find a layout with the perfect combination and location of placeholders, we suggest you use our favorite layout; Title Only. The Title Only layout provides the title you want for outlines and searching but has no other placeholder that might be automatically repositioned by PowerPoint. This gives you complete control over size, position and other object attributes.



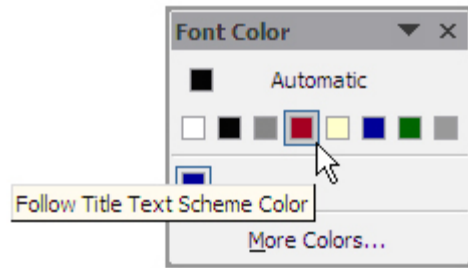
Title Only

However, the caveat with having most of your slide elements manually created with non-dynamic positioning is that you must accompany this with a rule of creating corporate standards in regards to the position of graphic design elements such as logos, footers and titles. Otherwise, you may find your content overlapping your design. Examples of this are pointed out in slide 2 above and the obvious right-weighted, non-symmetrical layout of the second slide. The first slide had a different workspace with a graphic element on the left and less space required for the brand logo at the bottom. In addition there is the obvious repositioning of some items but more permanence of others.

Commercial Break: For those advanced users who tend to rebel against rules, PowerPoint 2007 eliminates most slide layouts. Out-of-the-box you are only given a few very simple layouts and are allowed to create your own library to share and use over again. This should allow designers to use placeholders and layouts the way they want and not be limited by the draconian laws of 20 year old software created during the personal computer revolution, not the era of the enterprise.

Now back to collecting evidence

- Another issue with the content of this slide is the color of the text in the two fields. If you compare the text color with that on the original slide you will see that the color did not change. Unfortunately, it is now virtually unreadable because the new design template uses a background graphic with a color very close to the color used for the original text.
- Further investigation discovers that both design templates contain nine color schemes and the slides were created using a mix of custom colors and colors from the default color scheme palette.
- This forces us to conclude that the creator of this slide did not understand or use the color scheme palette. They just got lucky and got away with it in the Title field.
- A design template or slide show can have a lot of color schemes but only one is used for each slide and usually one is applied to all the slides in the show. (Our slide format audit tool assumes if it finds more than one scheme and lots of custom colors, the slide creator did not consciously work with the color scheme palette.)
- A color scheme has eight colors in its palette. You can view all the color schemes in a show from the XP or 2003 task pane; **Slide Design – Color Schemes** or the Design menu of earlier versions. At the bottom of the task pane is a button to edit color schemes. Here you are able to delete all but one scheme and set the colors in your color scheme palette to colors that compliment your design. If you or your content creators do not have an eye for complimentary color and readable contrast we suggest you have an artist or designer help with this part.
- By default new elements and placeholders on slides are mapped to one of the eight color scheme options. These are the 'Automatic' colors



The Font Color menu

RULE: Color Schemes provide a lot of power. Learn them. Use them. And only choose custom colors if you want the color to be constant, regardless of the slide design. Like when including a stop sign illustration on your slide – you always want that to be red. When you select text or a colorable object and then select the appropriate fill, line or text color menu, you will see the automatic color for the selected object followed by a row of eight colors. Those eight colors are the color scheme's palette. Any colors you use should be from this palette if you want the object's color to be dynamic and compatible with future design templates. If you regularly don't see the color options you need, you might consider changing the color scheme standard as part of the master design template and replace your corporate standard. Remember that any colors you use from the row of custom colors or by selecting More Colors... will not adapt to future designs.

As I mentioned earlier, there are dozens of other crimes we could have collected evidence on and presented in court. Regardless, I believe we have enough to convince a reasonable jury and, as they say on TV, 'our hour is up.'

We will leave saying 'whether you are creating presentations for others, are trying to incorporate others' slides into your own show, or are investigating your company's PowerPoint crime scene, remember that you may occasionally get away with a typical PowerPoint gotcha but the more you reuse slides, the more likely you will be to get caught by one of the many formatting issues waiting for you. There is no excuse for ignorance of the law and, as is the case with most creative endeavors, understanding the rules let's you know how to stay safe or design around them.'

If you found this article helpful let us know. We may write more. In addition to many more topics on the art slides reuse and management, we have mastered graphic optimization and how story-based slide categorization will get you out of the canned presentation trap and begin managing your slides for effective presentations and optimal reuse.

Learn more about [James Theall and SlideManager](#) in our Contributor's section.

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