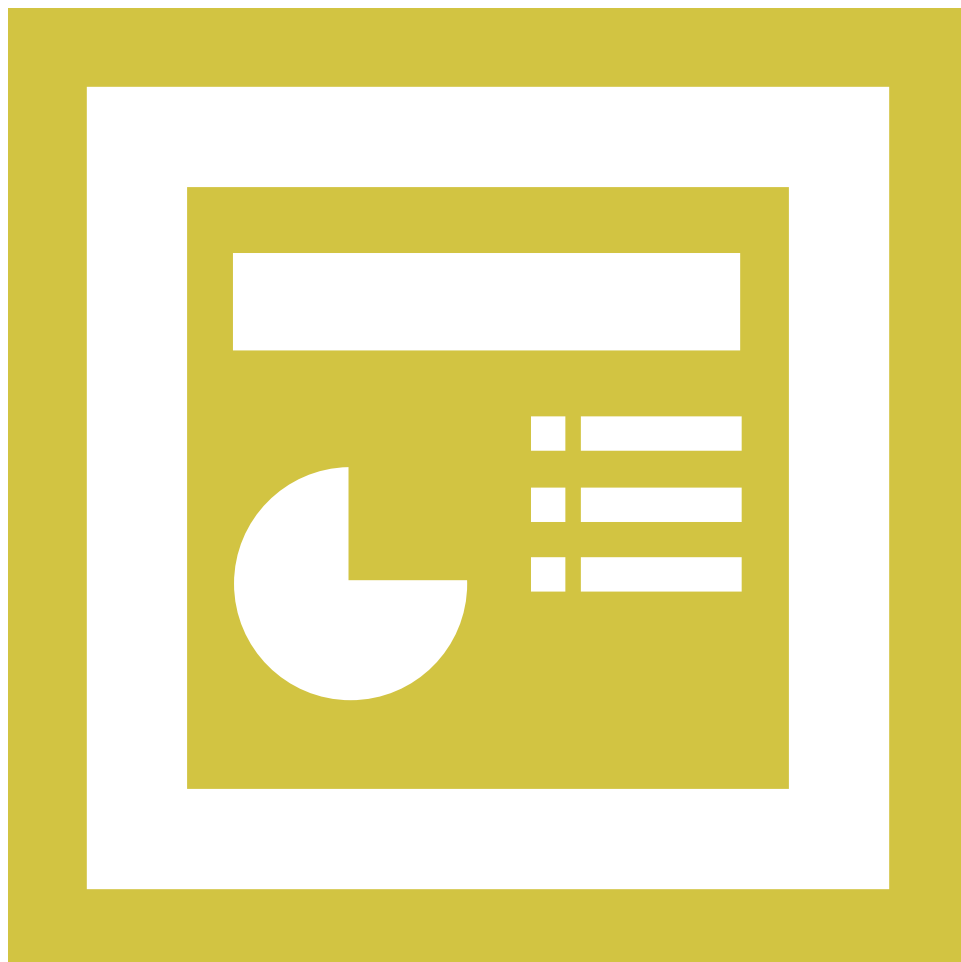


# Say It With **PowerPoint?**

Gene Zelazny



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# Say It With PowerPoint?

I trust you're aware of the heated battle now taking place among business communications experts over PowerPoint. Never has a piece of software generated so much emotion. You'd think that the combatants had all been shot by bullet points.

Shouting loudest are the critics. Chief among them is Yale Professor Edward Tufte, who argues that PowerPoint causes people to trivialize content and profoundly corrupts serious communications. *"Meetings should center on concisely written reports on paper, not fragmented bulleted talking points projected up on a wall,"* Tufte demands in his essay ***The Cognitive Style of PowerPoint.***

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Comedian Don McMillan takes a lighter, if no less devastating approach, mocking the software in his own PowerPoint presentation, as seen in this fun YouTube clip, ***Life after Death by PowerPoint***.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HLpjrHzgSRM>

On the other side is visual designer Garr Reynolds, who argues in his blog ***Presentation Zen*** that the problem is the misuse of PowerPoint. “*You do not need to (nor can you) pound every detail into the head of each member of your audience either visually or verbally. Instead, the combination of your words, along with the visual images you project, should motivate the viewer and arouse his imagination, helping him to empathize with your idea and visualize your idea far beyond what is visible in the ephemeral PowerPoint slide before him.*”

[http://presentationzen.blogs.com/presentationzen/2005/11/the\\_zen\\_estheti.html](http://presentationzen.blogs.com/presentationzen/2005/11/the_zen_estheti.html)

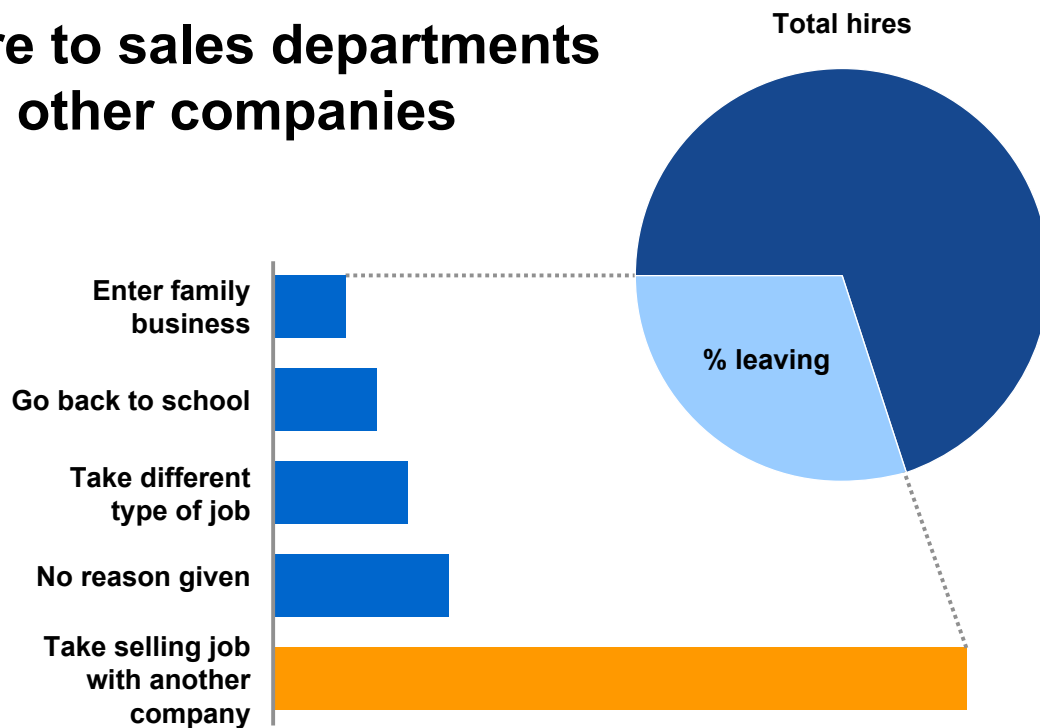
From my point of view, the only way to have a reasoned discussion on this is to split it into two questions: 1) Is PowerPoint a useful tool for designing visuals? To that, my answer is an emphatic yes. 2) Do people abuse it, and other tools, by over-relying on text visuals with bullet points? Also, a fervent yes, and I’ll add there are some easy way to avoid this.

For now, allow me to concentrate on the virtues of PowerPoint as a tool. I’ll address text visuals in another article.

Given my experience, I can’t help but marvel at how PowerPoint has transformed our professional lives, most of all as it applies to the production of visuals used in business presentations.

As I think about how we produce our charts today, I find it incredible that using my laptop and PowerPoint, I can produce the following chart in less than 10 minutes ... in black and white ... or in color. I can correct typos ... create animations such as fly, zoom, fade ... add scanned pictures ... add sound ... add video clips ... link it to a URL ... send it to colleagues all over the world ... make copies ... project it in conference rooms of any size ... all in 10 minutes. Awesome.

## Most sales force losses are to sales departments in other companies



It wasn't always like that. I entered the field of visual communications in the year 1961 **B.C.** That's **B**efore **C**omputers, **B**efore **C**alculators, **B**efore **C**opiers. Here's how it worked then.



A visual aids draftsman at a drafting table, would create the lines and the plots of the chart using a light blue pencil, triangles, T-squares, protractors, compasses, oval templates, engineer's scales.

If you needed to translate absolute values into percentages of their total, you'd use a slide rule.

The chart would go next to a varitype operator. These typewriters had several type fonts, none larger than 11 point.

From there, the chart went to proofreaders, who indicated typos.

Changes were made through a process known as "cut-outs." Don't ask.

The chart then went back to the draftsman, who would go over the blue lines with ruling pens and India ink.

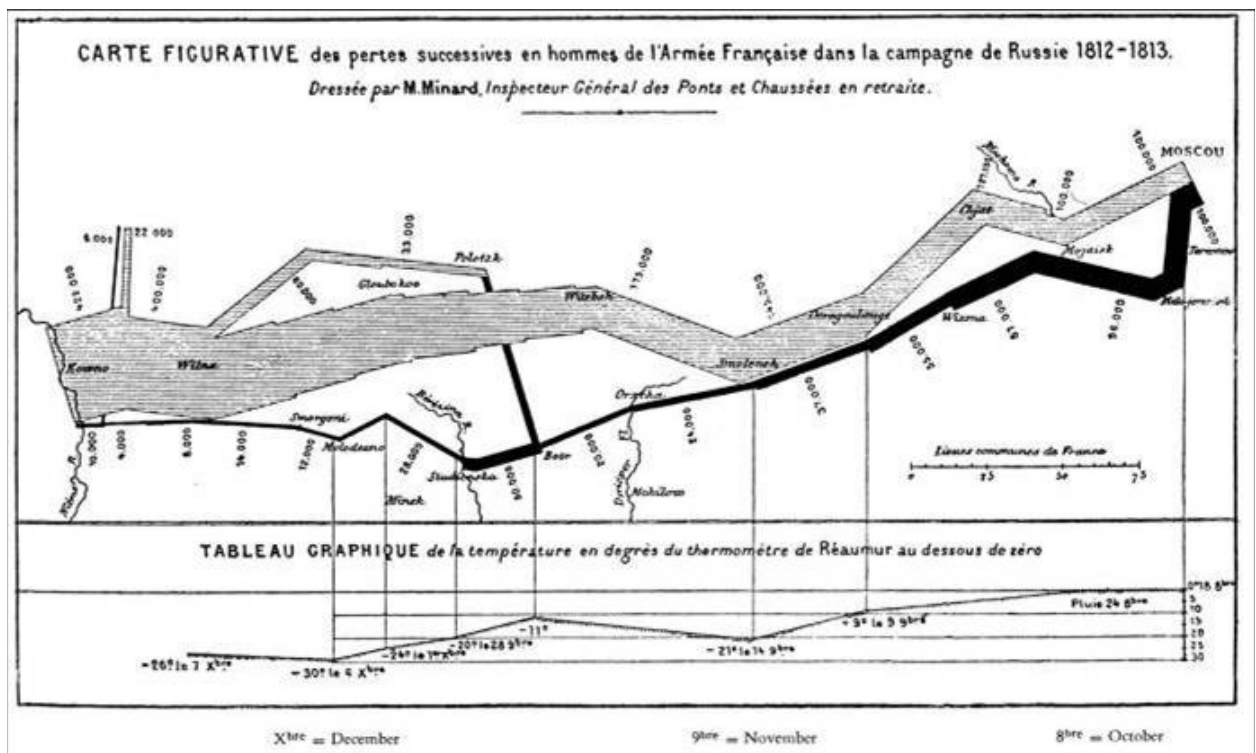
Then, on to someone who would apply Zip-a-tone: commercially available self-adhesive sheets of black and white patterns – diagonals, crosshatched, etc. – to create chart shadings.

If you wanted to use your charts in a business presentation, they would be sent out overnight to be produced as enlarged photostats, or overhead transparencies, or 35mm slides.

I leave you to imagine how much time all of this took, but it was significantly more than 10 minutes. So if nothing else, let's give PowerPoint a standing ovation for saving us loads of time.

Come to think of it, I marvel at how Microsoft has remained silent through the barrage of bad publicity about PowerPoint. On the other hand, given that I've read that it's used every day to produce some 30 million presentations, it's probably a wise strategy to let the software speak for itself. After all, to blame PowerPoint for the evils of presentations is like blaming cars for accidents. Let's put the blame where it counts: on the overuse, misuse, and abuse of PowerPoint.

To give you a sense of the sophistication that is PowerPoint, allow me to follow up on Professor Tufte's observation of what "may well be the best statistical graphic ever drawn" – this map of Napoleon's March on Moscow designed by Charles Joseph Minard (1781-1840).



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I'll grant that this is indeed a highly informational chart, especially considering that, when it's published in a book, you can take as much time as you need to study it (with the help of a magnifying glass in this case). Moreover, you also get this patient description of the chart by Professor Tufte on the facing page.

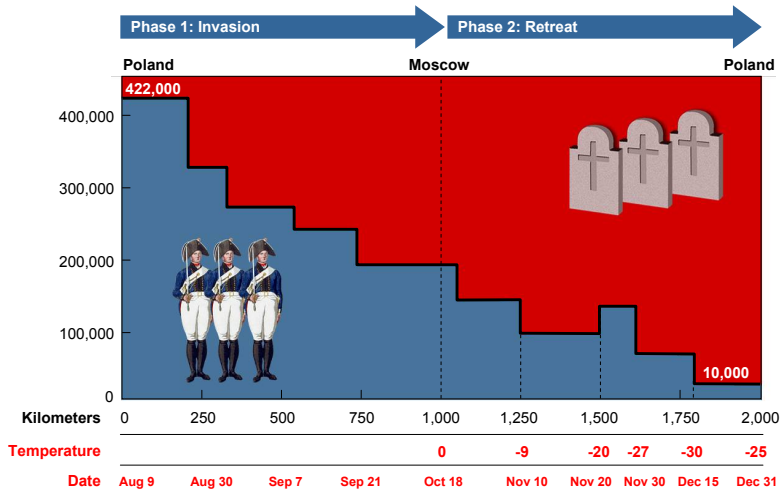
**Beginning at the left on the Polish-Russian border near the Niemen River, the thick band shows the size of the army (422,000 men) as it invaded Russia in June 1812. the width of the band indicates the size of the army at each place on the map. In September, the army reached Moscow, which was by then sacked and deserted, with 100,000 men. The path of Napoleon's retreat from Moscow is depicted by the darker, lower band, which is linked to a temperature scale and dates at the bottom of the chart. It was a bitterly cold winter, and many froze on the march out of Russia. As the graphic shows, the crossing of the Berezina River was a disaster, and the army finally struggled back into Poland with only 10,000 men remaining. Also shown are the movements of the auxiliary troops, as they sought to protect the rear and the flank of the advancing army. Minard's graphic tells a rich, coherent story with its multivariate data, far more enlightening than just a single number bouncing along over time. Six variables are plotted: the size of the army, its location on a two-dimensional surface, direction of the army's movement, and temperature on various dates during the retreat from Moscow.**

**It may well be the best statistical graphic ever drawn.**

For me, however, it doesn't work anywhere as effectively in a presentation, prepared with say, PowerPoint. In this situation, the presenter must describe the chart one step at a time so everyone in the audience focuses on the same point at the same time. Clearly, the chart's complexity makes this a challenge. Secondly, and I emphasize the word, AND, AND, the chart must be legible to each and every member of the audience. Clearly it's not.

Given these challenges, here are some additional options to tell the same story. All of these rely on the sophistication of PowerPoint as a production tool.

**THE ENEMY, HUGE DISTANCES, AND ICY TEMPERATURES DECIMATED NAPOLEON'S TROOPS FROM 422,000 TO 10,000**

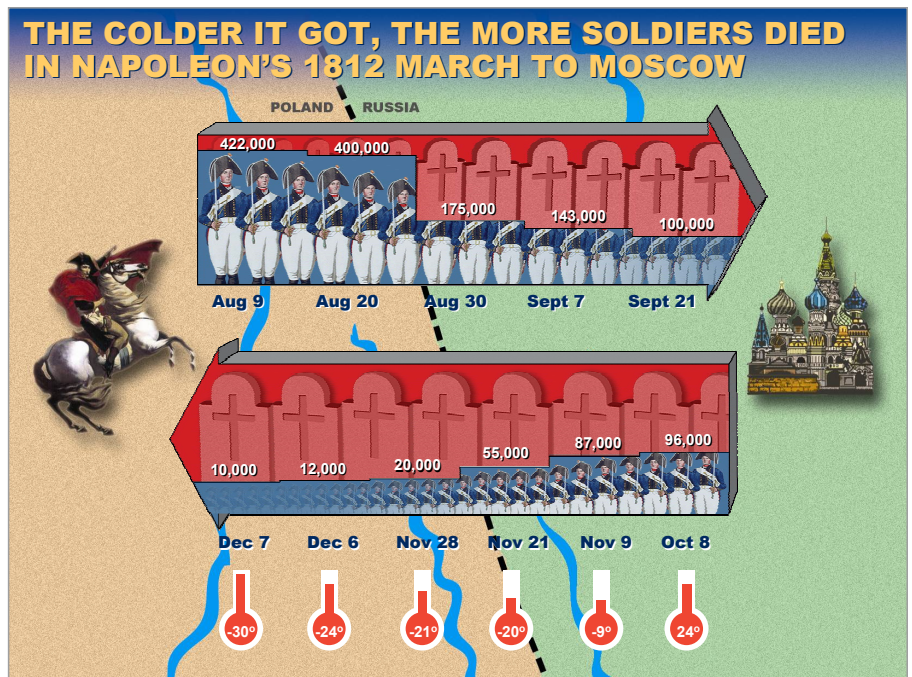


The first was designed by one of my talented colleagues, Manfred Krombholz.

Source: E. Tufte

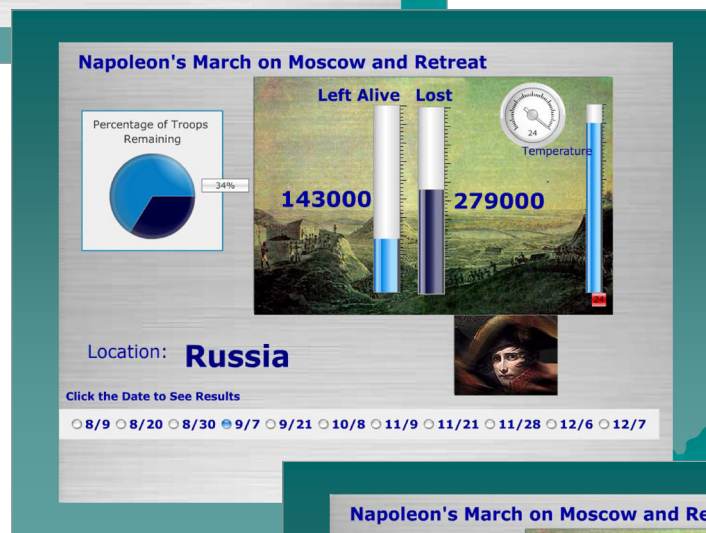
© 2005 Manfred Krombholz

I'll take credit for the second, which I show as an animated build: first, wiping right, and then wiping left as the red temperature thermostats indicate the dropping temperatures.





For the third, give a hand to Tom Bunzell, as he animates the changes in the data as the troops march to and from Moscow.





Finally, say thanks to Joe Pep, the Art Director of Archie Comics.

Contrasting any of these with the original chart, I leave you to decide on the value of PowerPoint as a tool for visualizing the march. Come to think of it, I wonder what Charles Joseph Minard's chart would have looked liked had he been able to capitalize of the wonders of PowerPoint.

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