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Technique— Not Technology

Before I jump into working with slides, I'm going to spend this and the next few chapters covering concepts that form the foundation of the techniques you'll learn later. These early chapters contain hard-learned rules and tips that will improve your composition and change the way you approach creating slide shows.

The main point of this chapter is that a show's success is more about technique and less about technology. Technology can play a role in success, but most success has more to do with technique. Technique involves the overall process, understanding of your goals and audience, the role that emotion plays, and how you've structured your story. The relative importance of each of these categories depends on what you're trying to accomplish.

First, what is a slide show? Up until the 1980s, slide shows were a presentation shown by someone operating a carousel projector using film transparencies (slides). The carousel held up to 130 slides and worked by projecting images onto a wall or screen. This gave birth to the term *slide show*. Most often presented by family elders, these slide shows included family photos and vacation shots, and they were usually quite boring. Background music in those days pretty much didn't exist, which added to the monotony.

In the 1990s, computers and digital photography started maturing. Slide shows grew into a progression of still images with no other effects. Background music was still rare, and small computer displays made it impractical to watch these shows in a family setting. They didn't really take off. In the 2000s, the term *slide*

show exploded and came to mean a full-on audiovisual presentation including a soundtrack, still images, video, sound effects, and an ever-increasing array of special effects. Even the medium the slide show is presented in doesn't really matter anymore. (I think of a slide show as a *rich-media presentation* rather than a video or a web show.) We can now produce high-definition output and deliver our family history in dazzling ways in our living rooms or on the web. We finally have background music to alleviate the boredom! Slide shows have evolved so far that the difference between what you see and hear in a slide show and a high-definition television commercial can be virtually indistinguishable.

I noticed in the 1990s that there was a huge rush toward digital photography and away from film. For the first time in history, photography was freed from the expensive, time-consuming, and toxic disadvantages of film. At the same time, the entire computer industry was almost completely ignoring what appeared to me as obvious: people weren't going to print most of their photos. Reputable companies like Kodak were predicting wholly unrealistic digital scanning and printing forecasts. Everyone I knew using digital photography was just not printing.

I saw a different future. I watched what people actually did with digital photography and imagined what I considered to be an efficient, and therefore the most likely, outcome. People wanted to share photos and video with the least effort, with a polished feel, and with minimal cost and time investment.

I created ProShow as a new way for you to use this digital technology. The idea is simple. ProShow provides an easy way for you to use digital stills and video. My main goal was to design the user interface in such a way that the average person could achieve professional-looking results without having to be an expert in the field.

What's the difference between video and a slide show? As I mentioned earlier, I think of a slide show as a rich-media presentation. A slide show is usually created with slide show software, and video is usually created with video-editing software. This limits video to the medium of video. This may seem like a pointless distinction until you realize that people usually think in terms of still image slide shows and not video editing. Most people consider video editing as a series of scenes, which are much like still images in their minds. Video clips are much more cumbersome to work with and more difficult to edit than still images. Nearly everyone has more still photographs to work with than video. This is especially true of most businesses. Slide show software works with media in a way that is more like the way most people think about it. This makes it easier to understand. Modern slide show software can create similar results for most people in much less time, and with much less training. Video-editing software is better at some things, but it's usually just those things that are meaningful only to professional videographers or hard-core video enthusiasts.

Ultimately, the goal is to create a show that your audience will appreciate, and one that does not come across as amateurish or difficult to watch. If people notice the production quality of the show, a change could probably make it better. If you have tried making any kind of production already, you may have discovered that making a good one is easier said than done. Creating a truly artful work of audio-visual wizardry is more difficult than most people first assume. After all, we are assaulted every day by fantastic multimedia works of art and rarely consider what it takes to create them.

Please don't get the idea now that polishing a slide show is so difficult that you'll never improve. Quite to the contrary, with just a few blended techniques, an otherwise boring composition can be made to *pop*. Also, the simplest and easiest-to-remember techniques make the biggest improvements. Figure 1.1 shows a “before and after” example that uses perhaps eight or so relatively simple techniques you can learn from this book.

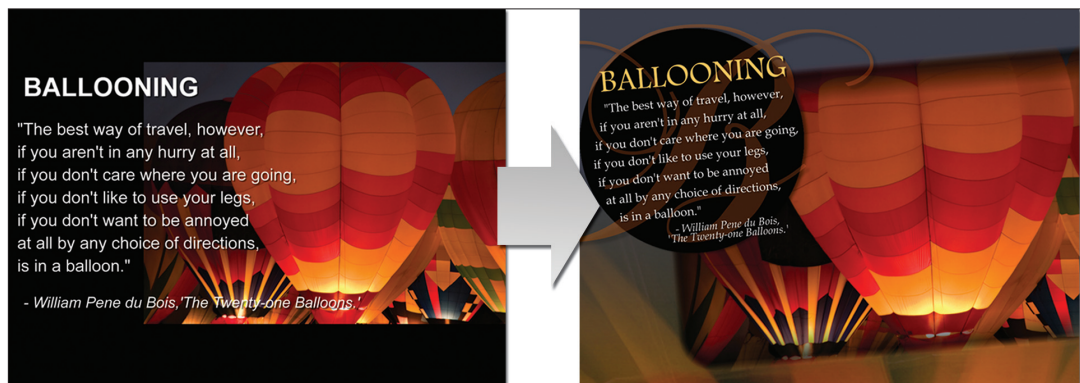


Figure 1.1

Just a few stylistic techniques are used to make this visual better.

Most people take for granted the mountains of expertise that professionals conjure to work their magic. In fact, a top-dollar 15-second commercial is usually produced by several teams of highly trained and highly paid professionals. Yet, we rarely think about this because we see so many commercials. Commercials we remember look great! We see them as *average* or *normal*. Don't feel bad if you don't achieve this level of perfection right away. I still have to work hard at it because it takes a lot of experience and effort to get things just right.

When you sit down to make your masterpiece, you must first take some time to understand that you will never feel like you are as good at it as you could be. As you practice, you continue to learn, refine, tweak, and fiddle with your projects.

At some point, you decide you're done, either because you've run out of time or because you get sick of your project and need to move on to something else. No matter what you do, your projects will never feel *done*.

Don't feel alone, because even the best professionals in the industry feel the same way. Even after decades of reworking and tweaking a slide show, your projects never quite feel finished. You can tell when you've done a good job when you can see that you achieved the goals you set for yourself.

Creating a great slide show involves some basic discipline and a lot of tricks. You need to understand the process you'll be going through, some basics about the medium you're working with, and what you're trying to accomplish. You need to know who your audience is and how they might react to different things you can do.

Process

There are many ways to make a slide show, and there is no single *right* way. This section should give you some ideas to help you decide on a process that will work for you.

The Right Way Is Whatever Works

Musicians are often asked how they write their songs, and the answers are always different. Some musicians have a rigid process they go through, and others end up at their goal through different paths each time. There really is no right way or wrong way to make a slide show, just as there is no right or wrong way to write a song.

Depending on what kind of slide show you need, there may be ways you can structure your workflow to be efficient. The idea is to create a *process* out of it. For example, if your goal is to do wedding slide shows as part of a photography service, what you're doing for each client will end up being similar each time. With this kind of business model, you should spend a lot of effort refining your process to the point where each slide show takes the minimum amount of time. This takes more planning, but it reduces the overhead for each production. In business, the art of making an easily repeatable process is the best way to be successful.

If you're making a slide show for a business—a looping trade show commercial, for example—most of your effort should be spent on your messaging and the technical look and feel of the work. In that environment, you have only a few seconds to capture people's attention, and they may start watching at any point. Thoughts about how long the show needs to be can be critical. What colors and stylistic

layout will you use? What are the most effective ways to add text in the right places, and at what times? How will you maximize the understanding of your product to the customers?

Or, perhaps you're documenting things about your family history and your target audience is your relatives. For them, the emotions of the story and reliving the memories are the keys to success. For these kinds of shows, visual quality isn't nearly as important, but respect and completeness are. Often, arranging the story to show feelings in an event can be the most powerful tool you have.

Perhaps you're a music promoter and you need to make short, interesting clips for a website promoting various music groups. For these, you need to highlight the music but also show visuals that aren't simply accompanying the music. For these kinds of clips, the show guides the listeners' thoughts and should enhance the music. Distracting listeners from the music would be the worst thing you could do! If you can find a way to use the visuals to make the music more memorable, you've got a real winner! This is exactly what music videos attempt to accomplish.

Maybe you're a portrait photographer using slide shows as a way to get photographic proofs to your clients. In this example, the music can make or break the emotional experience and should not distract from the photography. The music sets the tone, and the tone may change the customer's perception of the photography in good or bad ways for your sales. The photos must be the focal point, and you should spend a lot of effort figuring out how to add visual branding so you appear professional and competent. If you pull off the right mix, the customer will be much more confident in you and will order more prints and refer you to friends. Word-of-mouth advertising is incredibly powerful.

Note

If your goal is to tell a story, make sure you've done your homework constructing the story. If your goal is to tug on emotions, make sure you're using what you can maximize: the emotional response.

Depending on what you're trying to accomplish, the focus will be on different categories of the overall production.

Sight Versus Sound

Planning the process of making your show can be troublesome because there is no right way to do it. However, depending on what you want, thinking about the music first or the visuals first may help.

Visuals direct the audience's eyes and generally guide your thoughts. In general, they rarely guide emotion. Music can guide the audience's emotional response and set the tone for the visuals. I'm fascinated by the way that a subtle change in music can change how the audience feels, and it can do it without anyone in the audience realizing it has happened! When music and visuals are carefully combined, they can produce a surprisingly powerful—sometimes explosive—emotional response.

Most people do not realize just how emotionally powerful slide shows can be. I can remember back several years ago when a mother posted a ProShow slide show she had helped her son make. It was the most powerfully emotional show I have ever seen. I burst into tears. I showed it to others and had to get away from it before it started because I couldn't avoid crying if I saw it or heard it. There was nothing special about the production quality; in fact, it was quite poor. There was nothing professional about her son's voice-overs; they were technically pretty bad. What then could cause me, a seasoned businessman who has *seen it all*, to burst into tears and instantly want to do anything to help this family?

The boy, perhaps 6 years old, had just lost his father in the Iraq war. His mother helped him create this slide show as a way for him to say goodbye to his father and perhaps offer some closure for the loss. His terribly narrated voice-overs talking behind the pictures of his father smiling in the desert, telling his daddy that he would see him in heaven, was enough to make any adult cry. Not once did the brave little boy cry in the voice-overs. All of this was set to a popular patriotic song about America. Just the memory of that show haunts me. This show offered an absolutely horrific situation anyone would empathize with, combined with an audio track that reinforced the innocence of the boy with the heroism of his lost father. All of this was packaged in a context of the grieving mother helping her son to somehow deal with his horrible loss. These are powerful archetypal story elements, and each amplifies all the others. This is why the show was so powerfully emotional. The show's situation instantly hit me. I wish that family my best, yet I've never met them.

Another show I noticed was one a talented photographer posted on the Internet. The photographer carefully planned the story and did photography with a model to tell the tale. The production quality was not superb, but it wasn't shoddy either. It was, for lack of a better way to say it, human. In my opinion, had the production value of the show been much better, the story may not have worked as well. The common feeling of the show made it much more believable and *close to home*.

The show started with an average man getting out of bed, showering, shaving, drinking a cup of coffee, and looking at a schedule where he has a date with a woman at a certain time that day. He cleaned himself up very nicely. As the progression of still images and loving music moved on, some photos of his lover were occasionally shown so you could imagine the woman he would be meeting.

The man, looking very dapper and happy indeed, left his house, bought flowers, got in his car, and drove for a while. He eventually reached a lush, grassy park and proceeded toward his meeting. All at once, you realize the woman he was to meet was his deceased wife, and he went to the cemetery to pay his respects at her headstone. The architect of this story took advantage of our human instinct to make assumptions about pieces of a story that we aren't sure of, combined with building a sense of caring about likable characters and a likable situation. The normal response is to anticipate the most likely outcome. This plot twist used your growing anticipation to rip your happy assumptions away from you all at once and replace them with an awful change. This caused a sudden, violent emotional shift that resulted in an overwhelming feeling of empathy. Once again, I was hit by this piece.

There is no way I can communicate just how powerful the emotional impact of a well-constructed show can be. Just as a movie can make people cry, so can your slide show. If you have the right story, the right music, and the right visual elements, you can create the emotional response you're after in your audience's mind.

If the audience is emotionally attached to the subjects of a slide show, this effect is intensified. For example, a bride watching a show about her wedding is emotional by default because it documents the most anticipated day of her life and gives her an opportunity to relive it. I'll cover more about matching audio with visuals later in this book.

For informational shows like sales presentations, you can think of background music somewhat like packing material in a box: it should never get in the way of what is in the box. The music shouldn't distract from the content of the show, but it can be used to set the tone in the audience's mind—the emotional tone. For a military contractor, military or patriotic music could be used. For a kids clothing company, something fun and childlike could set the tone. Don't go overboard on music, and make sure to focus on your message first, using music only to set the emotional tone.

Understand Your Goal

Understanding what you are trying to accomplish sounds like a simplistic or even obvious thing—something we should take for granted. However, not knowing what you're doing in advance is one of the most common reasons projects get stalled, abandoned, and confused. I hope this section gives you some things to think about to make sure that before you begin, you have a clear vision of why you are making a slide show.

Before you start to plan how to put your show together, you need to know why you are doing the show in the first place, who your intended audience is, what you intend to say, and what emotional feeling you want the show to have. Take some time to think these things through, because your full understanding of each of these categories can considerably change the planning of your show.

Why Are You Doing This?

Understanding your goal is the process of answering the question, “Why am I making this show?”

Before you begin, you should make an effort to understand what you are trying to accomplish. It sounds obvious, but it is surprising how much this focuses your efforts if you keep asking yourself this question during the process. You need to know who you want to view your show (your *target audience*), what you intend to say (your *messaging*), what emotional state you are trying to achieve (your *tone*), and how you intend to deliver your show to your target audience (your *medium*).

Target Audience

Before any other details, you should have a clear target. Who do you want or need to reach? Regardless of the messaging, constructing a show for businesspeople would most likely end up being a much different endeavor than constructing a show for children.

If you are making shows as a business, you may need to think a bit more about your own business model. Sometimes the majority of the audience is *not* the most important audience. In many Westernized countries, wedding photographers target the bride and the bride’s father when they create their shows because it’s all about business psychology. The secret is in the buying decision. The bride’s father most often pays for the wedding. This means that if the father feels it necessary to buy, he’ll buy. He’ll have to like the show to do that. But often more importantly, the key to convincing the father is the bride’s reaction. If the father sees the bride cry, he’ll be much more likely to buy. For any successful businessperson, the target is about who writes the check and what goes through that person’s mind at the point of making the decision. In the wedding photography business, there’s a saying: “When they cry, they buy.”

Whatever your purpose, make sure you form a clear idea of who you intend your show to speak to. Visualize that type of person and ask yourself what she would respond to. Is she more stimulated by emotional messaging? Does she respond well to humor? Will she only care about the information? Will she be able to sit through your complete message, or do you need to cut it down? Thinking about these kinds of things and getting a clear understanding of your audience does wonders during the planning and creation of your production.

Note

I've had conversations with videographers who talk about how much better their training videos would teach the intended audience if only their managers didn't constantly gear the material toward the egos of the decision makers writing the checks. Some business hierarchies are often inefficient simply because the people in power don't always understand as much as the experts they employ. Perhaps more decision makers should defer to their experts a little more and make sure their experts are competent.

Messaging

What can you say? What do you want to say? What do you need to say?

To answer these questions, you need to have a firm grasp of your target audience. You need to understand what action you expect them to take. This differs greatly depending on your goals.

With a family show, the messaging is more about the visual documentation of events. It is less about information and more about reliving an event. It's sometimes important to make sure that members of the audience are represented so they don't feel left out. Think about the event and the personalities of the audience. Often, there is a family member who is very sensitive to the fact that the funny—and perhaps irritating—things he does are mentioned. Other family members may be getting older and want to see the kids more than the adults. Only you know your family, and making lists of these things helps once you get started. This can also guide you when you start to remove material, which is one of the most important editing tasks to be done later on.

If your show is business oriented, you're probably most interested in reducing the overall scope of the message to only the major points necessary to get the audience to agree with the proposition you're offering.

For example, let's say you're selling a product or service and need a commercial for a trade show. This kind of show should be short and to the point. The goal is to get people's attention as they walk by, and you have mere seconds to do it in. First, you need to get people's attention and convey value as quickly as possible. Second, you may need to focus on advantages over competitors in case they already have a solution. In that case, you want to get people to switch to your product or service.

The visuals of business shows are important aesthetically, but this section is about messaging. What can be shown in the visuals that will be instantly recognizable as valuable? What can be eliminated because the audience will assume it to be the case anyway? What can be shown about your product or service that is different? What will be immediately seen as worth looking into for the average passerby?

Think about the words and phrases you'll use. The shorter, the better. Try to choose words and phrases that are easily understandable, easily readable, and as memorable as possible. You may catch someone's attention for 1–2 seconds before she is distracted by something else, and you want her to remember what she saw for that short time so she'll remember to come back.

If you're not familiar with what I call *ad speak*, it is the art of using bad grammar that works better in certain situations than correct grammar. This is extremely common in advertising. And there it is again. In the previous paragraph, I used the sentence fragment, "The shorter, the better." I know this is grammatically incorrect; it would earn me a lousy grade in a middle school English class. However, I know you understood it. One could argue that I could have used the correct sentence, "Short is better." After all, it is fewer words, right? But the phrase I used is a common saying that triggers a familiar memory reflex that a correct sentence wouldn't have. I used it because people intuitively recognize it. My only goal was to communicate; being correct with my grammar would have actually hurt my goal. The incorrect solution was simply more efficient. It's always preferable to focus first on success and only secondarily on grammar. In business, optimizing the process for the customer makes more money. (*My former teachers are likely reeling, but at the end of the day, I'm published and they're not.*)

With training shows, a trainer will probably have a series of ideas to teach. This is a *curriculum*. Most of the production focuses on the material, so the show production becomes more of a visual presentation exercise than a battle with messaging.

Weddings, Bar Mitzvahs, Bat Mitzvahs, christenings, and other family events are most often about documenting the event and less about messaging. But there is a messaging component if you're creating these shows as a service. The introduction of the show and the credits and ending of the show can help you brand your business. What can you put in these places to benefit your business? Once again, you have just a few seconds to make an impression. Don't overdo it, because nobody likes to be *spammed* with overdone advertising, but at the same time, it is often expected that you can tastefully advertise in the process. Just make sure the show looks refined and that you're only saying what you need to say. If done well, branding actually adds value to a show because it gives it a professional and well-produced appearance.

Emotional State

Creating an emotional state in a show is a matter of music, the speed the show takes as it moves along (*pacing*), and to a lesser extent, visuals. These three elements should agree with each other, or the results will be confusing.

Tip

An interesting concept I've learned over the years is "the problem that people cannot articulate." In other words, the average person cannot tell you what is wrong with something. For example, if the music and pacing of a show are slow but the pictures are of race cars, many people won't be able to tell you what is wrong with the show; they may even tell you it was *good*, but it doesn't get a *great* reaction. Another example is a family show with slightly dark or haunting sounding music. It just seems wrong to most people, but not perhaps wrong enough to pinpoint it. Most people can't explain what's wrong unless things are very out of whack. It's often necessary to look for this kind of subconscious problem when you get mediocre responses. When you get it right, people rave about the results.

Music can be energetic, slow, or loving. It can have a country feeling, a historical feeling, or maybe a futuristic feeling. If your show goes through sections that should be faster or slower, make sure the music agrees. You can use changes in music to alter the pace of the show and vice versa. You don't have to play every song you use all the way through. If the show is moving on to a different section, fade the current song out and fade into a new song that matches the new feeling you want.

Together, visuals, music, and pacing create a style. The elements of the style should agree for the best results. Watch what others have done and ask yourself about the style of those shows. What songs worked and didn't? Which things did you like or dislike about the visuals in other shows? When you watch commercials, think about how the music and pacing work with the visuals. Think about the emotion the style creates and about how different elements can be used to get the emotion you want.

Review

Technique involves a lot more than what this chapter has described. It could be argued that this entire book describes technique. I hope I've described some important things to consider that you may not have thought about before. Knowing who you are targeting, how to express yourself, how emotions play into it, and how the mind works with sound and visuals are things you need to continually question if you want to get better at creating great slide shows.