

Book Review

Duarte, N. (2008). *slide:ology: The Art and Science of Creating Great Presentations*. Sebastopol, CA: O'Reilly Media, Inc. (274 pp., softcover \$34.99).

Jeannine Lane
Grand Valley State University

Justin Sims
Grand Valley State University

Each day at communication centers, a variety of clients come through the door with a range of individual needs. Some are experienced presenters, some are fledgling hopefuls. This same diversity of abilities holds true for those seeking assistance with visual presentations. Some have used these platforms throughout their lives, others are still learning how to simply create a new slide. Nancy Duarte's book, *slide:ology: The Art and Science of Creating Great Presentations*, focuses on effective approaches to building, polishing, and using visual aids to tell your story. The book, however, is not for beginners. Rather, it's for seasoned users of presentation technologies who are seeking to take their skills to the next level, and the consultants who assist them in reaching that goal. Duarte challenges readers to reinvent their approach to presentations.

While Duarte does not seem to have a specific preference for a particular platform, she does mention PowerPoint by name. However, her lessons, ideas, and approaches can be applied to other visual presentation technologies including, but not limited to, Prezi, Google Slides, and Keynote. Regardless of platform, gone are the days of haphazardly placing text into a template and calling it a day. Instead Duarte proposes a new ideology that frames PowerPoint creation as an entirely organic, creative process. The chapters of this book can be placed into three categories: conceptualization, design, and implementation.

If your first thought when creating a visual presentation is to open up a blank document in your chosen platform, you're doing it wrong. First, Duarte begins the book by urging readers to remember the value of thoughtful deliberation. One must create *ideas first, slides second*. This attention to ideas through conceptualization allows for both the development of a big picture purpose for the PowerPoint and an ongoing focus on that purpose. Each slide should play a role in supporting or explaining a larger argument or story. In addition to simply asking readers to practice conceptualization, Duarte presents highly-visual examples, maps, and diagrams as examples of the brainstorming process.

We can all agree that overloaded slides are bad. They're boring, they're tacky, and they're ineffective. *slide:ology* has a heavy emphasis on the value of a PowerPoint's design. While inherently a visual medium, professional PowerPoints often lack appropriate creativity. Both humdrum and gaudy PowerPoints are less than effective. Duarte encourages readers to approach each PowerPoint as a blank canvas. The artist, then, must remember that a well-designed presentation will best illustrate his or her ideas, therefore connecting to the target audience and accomplishing the larger goal or purpose established in the conceptualization stage.

Finally, we would all be well served to remember that visual presentation aids are a tool for the audience, not the speaker. Duarte concludes the book with suggestions

for implementing and applying this new PowerPoint mindset. She wants readers to take an audience-centered approach when creating their slides in order to fully maximize the connection with an impact on each individual who receives the message. To do this, she encourages readers to strive for fluidity throughout their presentations—both orally and visually. This fluidity is characterized by effective PowerPoint elements such as the flow of ideas and content, use of images, and clear but creative transitions between ideas. While this seems simple, Duarte discusses strategies for using her tools to make presentations more effective.

The communication center community would benefit greatly from reading Duarte's book and applying its lessons. Directors will find the book useful for creating staff trainings that will increase their center's quality of assistance and general credibility. On one hand, chapters that focus on new ideologies and approaches will be beneficial for providing general trainings. On the other hand, chapters with specific foci such as creating diagrams and arranging elements can be used for in-depth, definitive trainings. Similarly, consultants will be better equipped to provide clients with streamlined, cutting-edge feedback. Inevitably, peer tutors will encounter presenters who have only been exposed to visual presentation technologies in non-communication-based settings. For example, the hard sciences such as biology and chemistry frequently rely on overloaded visual aids. For those clients, this book will serve as a landmark work that legitimizes advice from communication centers and provides a refined and refreshing take on visual aids. Who is this book not for? Those who are just learning how PowerPoint functions technically and/or theoretically, such as very young students or those who are continuing their educations later in life,

should avoid this book until they have an appropriate amount of screen time under their belts.

Duarte focuses not only on changing visual aids, but changing the whole mentality towards creating and sharing those visual aids. She challenges the reader to evaluate all aspects of presentations while simultaneously keeping each audience member's frame of reference in mind. Using these tactics will enhance the experience for all parties involved and strengthen the chance that the presenter's message is delivered clearly. Duarte encourages readers to consider who the presentation targets, what its purpose is, and how the message will be effectively delivered. This new approach is particularly useful to communication consultants who use a Socratic approach to consulting. The focus on ideation provides an opportunity for consultants to use questions to spark new ideas and guide the cognitive-creative process of the clients. After reading this book, consultants should be able to identify each client's attitude toward PowerPoints and offer advice on rethinking the larger role of this visual aid. This meta-directional advice will not only aid the client on *this* presentation, but *all* future presentations.

While the strengths of *slide:ology* are many, those same strengths could deny access to some potential audiences who need to hear Duarte's advice, such as the average college student. Undoubtedly, some students will be quick to dismiss the book's content and decide that Duarte's teachings are unnecessarily advanced, technical, or highbrow. While communication center consultants are much better equipped to understand the importance of this content, issues may arise when it comes time to convey its content to a client. The book is full of examples, but we feel that the examples run the risk of getting lost in translation during interactions between

consultants and clients. For example, Duarte spends sixteen pages discussing light and color as they apply to effective presentations. This amount of information is potentially overkill for a typical communication center consultant. A better approach may be to summarize this information in an easily digestible way. Additionally, some examples and diagrams are detailed but seem convoluted and lack true step-by-step instructions that may be necessary for a novice.

Duarte's *slide:ology* has set a new precedent for how communication professionals, including those working in communication centers, view PowerPoint. Duarte takes the old idea of using a PowerPoint during a presentation and revitalizes it for use in the future. As for our target audience, it should be noted that consultants who read *slide:ology* will gain both a new understanding of visual aids and a well-rounded skill set necessary for the ongoing development of communication center craft. In short, Duarte's *slide:ology* provides a new avenue to take PowerPoint to the next level that allows presenters to clearly connect and communicate with audiences. While we all know the tragedy that is a bad PowerPoint, this book has the potential to make PowerPoints great again—one presentation at a time.