

How to Create a Slide Essay in PowerPoint

by Tom Field

Slide essays are a series of projected photographic images synchronized to music. Traditionally these have been done with 35mm color slides. Two projectors and a dissolve unit allow smooth cross-fades between images, as well as automation of the slide advancement in time to the music. The dissolve unit is controlled by inaudible tones (“beeps”) recorded on a separate tape track.

Creating and displaying a slide essay with film requires skill and special, expensive equipment. Few people own the required multi-track recorder, dissolve unit, and two or more well-aligned projectors. This equipment is now becoming obsolete (no longer manufactured).

Thus, it has been impractical to freely share these beautiful creations with family, friends, and others. Furthermore, I suspect many carefully-made slide essays have been lost after only one public showing. What a shame: all those masterpiece works are certainly worthy of sharing and preservation for posterity.

Digital Slide Essays

The emergence of digital imaging as a mainstream technology has enabled creation of digital slide essays. A computer displays a sequence of images in time with music or other audio. slide essays can be prepared with generic office software and shared with family and friends anywhere, as long as they have a compatible computer.

This article gives instructions for creating a digital slide essay with Microsoft PowerPoint, because many people already own this software. If you don't already have access to PowerPoint, there are less expensive software tools that may be easier to use, such as Photodex Pro Show.

NOTE: PowerPoint slide timings can be affected by computer performance or other factors. PowerPoint does not play long slide shows with great precision or repeatability. If your slide essay requires tight synchronization between images and audio, you should consider a tool other than PowerPoint!

Prerequisites

To start, you need to assemble your collection of images and your music in digital form. That means scanning slides or negatives, or using images from a digital camera. You should follow the conventional wisdom for selecting, sequencing, and timing slides for a slide essay. This paper only deals with the mechanics of putting the images into a PowerPoint slide show, and not the artistic elements of a slide essay.

Your music must be in a digital file on your computer. There are many ways to achieve this, but typically you'll extract digital audio from a CD. If your music is on CD, you need to “rip” the audio to create files on your computer. Windows XP can do this for you with

Windows Media Player (choose MP3 highest quality). Or you can use a third-party software tool such as [Audiograbber](#) to create WAV files or MP3 files. The WAV format files are most universal, but newer PCs will be able to play MP3 files.

Newer versions of Microsoft PowerPoint contain automated features that make the entire process easy. These instructions are written for PowerPoint 2003 (part of Office 2003). If you have PowerPoint 2002 (part of Office XP) you should be able to follow all or most of these steps. I cannot give specific instructions for other versions of PowerPoint because I do not have access to them. Upgrading to 2003 is not so expensive if you're willing to buy used software (see Amazon "New and Used" links) or if you can qualify for the educational discount (is anyone in your family a student or instructor?). By the way, you don't need the printed manuals for Microsoft Office products, as the on-line help is excellent.

Preparing Your Images

The digital images should be prepared before putting them into PowerPoint. In another article, I offer suggestions on [How to Prepare Electronic Images for Projection](#) using Photoshop (version 7 or CS). This process applies to digital slide essays viewed on a computer monitor as well as projection.

Step by Step: Creating a Slide Essay with PowerPoint

Photo Album. Start PowerPoint 2003 or 2002 (Office XP), and close any open presentation files. [Note that Office 2000 and earlier may not have the Photo Album feature. Upgrade – it's worth it.] Do the following to create a Photo Album:

1. From the menu bar, click Insert : Picture : New Photo Album.
2. Click the File/Disk... button and navigate to your image collection.
3. Select the images you want, or add them all with Ctrl-A.
4. Click the Insert button when you're ready.
5. Then click the Create button. PowerPoint creates a new presentation containing all of your selected images plus a title sheet.
6. If you don't want titles, delete all the text on the title sheet (select it, hit Delete key). If you do want titles, change the text color to some color other than black.
7. Save your presentation. Put it in a location where you'll keep working copies of Digital slide essays, and give it a descriptive name. While you continue to work, save frequently (Ctrl-S is easy).

Background. Set the background to black (instead of the default white) for your presentation:

1. From the menu bar, click View : Master : Slide Master.
2. From the menu bar, click Format : Background.
3. Select black as the background fill color.
4. Click the Apply to All button.
5. Click Close Master View.

Sequence. If your slides are not in the proper sequence for your Digital slide essay, use the “Slide Sorter View” to rearrange them: View : Slide Sorter. Click a slide and drag it into the correct position.

Set Up Show. Set the basic parameters of the presentation. These may be your defaults, and you can change them to other settings if desired.

1. From the menu bar, Slide Show : Set Up Show...
2. Under “Show type” select Presented by a speaker (full screen).
3. Under “Advance slides” select Using timings, if present.
4. Under “Performance” select slide show resolution 1024x768.

Set Transitions. The Slide Transitions pane is used to select a transition effect (such as dissolve) between slides, and to set the timing of each slide.

1. From the menu bar, Slide Show : Slide Transition. This brings up the Slide Transition pane.
2. Select your desired transition effect for all slides. Later, you can select individual slides and change their transition. A good basic choice is “Fade Smoothly”
3. Set transition speed to Medium. You can experiment to see which speed works best for you.
4. Under “Advance slide” uncheck “On mouse click” and check “Automatically after” and type 5 seconds or so as a default. Note that 5 seconds will be entered as “00:05” not “05:00”.
5. Click the Apply to All Slides button.
6. Press F5 to get a quick look at your slide show and see if any of the above settings need to be changed. Press the Esc key to stop the show.

Add Music. You must have the audio on your hard disk:

1. Select the title slide, which should be the first slide. If you don’t have any titles, this slide will be black.
2. From the menu bar, Insert : Movies and Sounds : Sound from File.
3. Navigate to your music sound file, and double click it.
4. In response to the prompt, “How do you want the sound to start in the slide show?” click Automatically.

Adjust Music Settings.

1. Select the music icon on the first slide.
2. From the menu bar, Slide Show : Custom Animation.
3. In the Custom Animation pane, select the audio track (may be labeled something like “Media 3”), and click the drop-down arrow at the right.
4. From the drop-down menu, select Effect Options...
5. Under “Stop playing clip,” select “After:” and enter a large number such as 999 slides.
6. Under the Timing tab, enter a delay of 5 seconds. Later, you’ll decrease this delay, but for now it should help with the setup of your show.
7. Under the Sound Settings tab, click the Sound Volume icon and turn the volume up to maximum.
8. Check the box for Hide sound icon during slide show.
9. Click OK.

10. Press F5 to check that the music starts at the right place. Press the Esc key to stop the show.

Rehearse Timing. Each slide can remain on the screen for a time determined by you. If you want to set variable timings quickly and easily, use the Rehearse Timings feature described below. Otherwise, you can manually enter a time for each slide by selecting the slide and entering the time under “Advance slide” on the Slide Transition pane.

1. From the menu bar, Slide Show : Rehearse Timings.
2. The first slide will appear on screen, and at the top left is a control bar with buttons.
3. Position your mouse over the “Next” button which has the symbol of a right-facing arrow. You need to get ready to press this button quickly, so you’re ready for the next step.
4. At the moment you want the next slide to appear, click the next button. You’ll see the transition occur, and the next slide will be displayed. Typically, this will occur in time with some event in the music.
5. When you’ve finished, press the Esc key. Click Yes when asked if you want to keep the timings, or No if you want to abandon the timings you just created.

Fine Tune Timing. If you have gotten the slide timings pretty close, but need to make some individual adjustments, you can select each slide in question and adjust the timing by entering the time under “Advance slide” on the Slide Transition pane. Finally, you can adjust the timing of the first slide so there isn’t too much dead time at the beginning of the show. Set the timing of the first slide (as described above), and then adjust the delay in the music start (under Custom Animation) until the music starts right as you wish. As noted in the introduction, PowerPoint slide timings may not be very precise or repeatable!

Package for CD. The completed Digital slide essay can be packaged for CD. PowerPoint can include a free viewer program on the CD that will allow other Windows users to play your slide essay even if they do not have PowerPoint.

If you are running Windows XP and have a CD recorder, PowerPoint can create a recorded CD – click the Copy to CD button. Otherwise, click the Copy to Folder button – you can create your CD another way later (such as with Roxio Easy CD Creator).

If you have created several Digital slide essays, they can be combined onto a single CD that you can send your friends and family. Under the Options button, you’re given choices about how the presentation will play. One option is to let the end user select from a menu which slide essay to play.

Conclusion. Once you’ve gone through these steps, it’s easy to repeat the process and create multiple slide essays. PowerPoint is not designed specifically for this, but the latest versions work well enough. Again, if you don’t own PowerPoint already, there are other software tools created specifically for making slide essays. They may be better suited and cheaper, so don’t buy Microsoft Office just for this one task. Enjoy!