

2013

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Recommended Citation

Paul Birch, *Pointing out the Power of Prezi, Part II: Learning to Use Prezi*, 23 *Trends in L. Libr, Mgmt. & Tech.* 29 (2013)

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Pointing Out the Power of Prezi, Part II: Learning to Use Prezi

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Whatever stance one adopts about Prezi versus PowerPoint at the podium, there can be little doubt that Prezi is by far the more versatile of the two for building self-guided web presentations. In this setting, there is no issue of the presentation competing with the speaker for audience attention since there is no live speaker.¹ One simply builds the prezi and provides a link to it. Online visitors click the arrows to guide themselves through it. If spoken narration is desired, the builder can incorporate audio clips, perhaps cropped from a full-length recording of a narrative, into path points. A recently-added feature even lets the viewer specify an auto-run mode and select a frame-to-frame time interval instead of having to click on arrows.

Anyone who has the impression that building a prezi usually requires more preparation time than creating a PowerPoint presentation gets no argument from me. After all, a full-blown PowerPoint can be created from a simple Word outline in just a few clicks. That said, the extra steps involved in creating a rudimentary Prezi are few; and even a rudimentary Prezi can be both effective and impressive.

A Short Lesson

Here is a walk-through.² With it, you can create a very primitive first prezi—one that you will probably not care to share with friends or relatives, but one designed to demonstrate some of the basic moves. Be warned that Prezi interface development has been very fast-moving since the site’s inception. Details described at this writing (mid-2013) of what to click may change.

- 1) As a preliminary step, do an online search and download a small-to-medium sized image file depicting something that is round—a ship’s wheel, a faucet handle, a radio dial, whatever. Take a picture of your own, if you prefer. Save it to a location you will remember for access a few steps down.
- 2) Identify a PowerPoint file of your own for use in this walk-through. Don’t worry too much about what it is or whether you consider it a good one or a bad one, but do select one with at least eight slides. (PowerPoint and PDF files are the two multi-page formats one currently can import into Prezi. This walk-through uses a PowerPoint file, as the two processes are not quite identical.)
- 3) Browse to prezi.com and sign up for a free account. If you are eligible, select the free academic option which provides more storage space and flexibility in how you share documents. Login to the account.
- 4) Click the “Create a New Prezi” button. You will be given template options, but click instead the “Start blank prezi” link. (This, I admit, is an intervention of my own distaste for the “PowerPoint-ization” of Prezi with templates. Keep in mind their availability if you don’t mind such things.)
- 5) You will likely see first an empty round frame that Prezi provides for inserting title information. Click on its interior and experiment a bit with the text editing box that appears. Note that various styling options are available. Unfortunately for those of us who need to reproduce legal citations, italics are not.³ Clicking outside this editing box will finalize the entered text, and clicking again on the text will bring up a control box for adjusting text size and position.

- 6) Move your cursor somewhere outside the title frame and draw a second frame using the Frames & Arrows button at the top of the display. Prezi offers both visible and invisible frames in various shapes and types. The invisible frames are ... well ... invisible, and often valuable for grouping elements unobtrusively at a path point. But for the present purpose, select the bracketed frame, something of a Prezi trademark.
- 7) Drag the mouse to draw the new frame to cover approximately one-third of your screen area in the middle. Now reward your efforts by clicking the Save button, although Prezi does auto-save your project at very lenient intervals and provides an undo button in case of overzealous auto-saves (or your own mistakes).
- 8) Now add the round object image you found in the first step, using the Insert option from the Image menu. When the image appears, click on it and use the corner handle to resize it so that it will be small, but recognizable. Drag the image to the center of the frame.
- 9) It's time now to incorporate the PowerPoint document you selected. Use the Insert menu to select "PowerPoint" and then browse to select yours. A bit of processing time will elapse before the file's individual slides appear as framed thumbnails in an import box at right. For this example, do not use the "Select All" button.⁴ Instead, select the slides by clicking on the first and then shift-clicking on the last one you want to use. Drag the selected slide frames outside the import box and close the box using its "X" button.
- I0) One-by-one, click the thumbnails on their centers and drag them into the frame containing the round object image. Arrange them evenly around the image (12:00, 2:00, 4:00, etc.), and position them so that they barely overlap the circular object frame. If necessary, use the plus/minus buttons uniformly to resize the slide thumbnails to where they are visible but will still fit in position.
- II) This is an *optional* step designed to demonstrate an important Prezi feature, but one with effects that some may dislike. You are going to swivel the slides or PDF pages to radiate around the center image with their top sides aimed outward. (The six o'clock image will be inverted.) Click once on the bracket frame to reveal the blue frame for manipulating objects, and then hold your cursor over any corner. A little tale with a circular end and curvy arrow will appear. You can then drag the object clockwise or counter-clockwise until its angle approximates its position in the circle.

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- I2) The basic prezi is now complete, and it's time to create a path for showing it. At the very left of your screen you will see the path column, and you will likely see a thumbnail of the round title frame, automatically inserted as the first path point. Although you could delete it from the path and start fresh, keep it as the first view of the presentation. Hit the Edit Path button to continue.
- I3) In edit path mode, a click on any kind of object on the canvas will add it as the next point on the path. First we want to provide a full view of the bracketed frame. Click on its perimeter to add it. Next, add the individual slide frames to the path. Starting at the twelve o'clock point, hover your cursor over a PowerPoint slide frame, but do not click until you see the entire frame (and not just the content within) highlighted. Then click to add it. As you add items, you will notice both the development of a path string with numbered points on your canvas and the addition of thumbnails down the path row on the left. Both the path string and the thumbnails in the row can be manipulated by dragging to edit your path. Sometimes, though, it is easiest to use the "Clear all" link at the bottom of the path row and start over again.
- I4) Your prezi is ready to show. Hit the Done button to leave path edit mode, then hit the Present button to preview your work and bask in its loveliness!

What you have just created is obviously a rudimentary example, and not necessarily one that comports with best Prezi practices. Further steps—perhaps better exercised on a prezi you intend to use—might include adopting techniques that exploit Prezi's showing-instead-of-telling capabilities. Find images that do the work of textual slides more elegantly. Reduce fifty-word slides to two words, and make them large if they are important. Find an eye-grabbing theme image for your canvas or devise some other unifying motif for the various sections of your presentation. Let your imagination run free, the better to tell your story.

Some Useful Tips

- **Take advantage of prezi.com for further learning.** Their tutorials, webinars, and forums will take you well beyond the scope of the above walk-through exercise. In addition, looking at a lot of shared prezis can be highly educational to discover techniques to adopt or avoid. Search the site for topics of

interest or browse the “Prezis We Like” section, linked of the Prezi home page. For more examples, visit their Facebook page. Examine them both for elements you like and those you dislike.

- **Share and benefit from others’ sharing.** Users registered at the free Public account level have no choice but to share their prezis with all other users. The free educational and paid registration levels permit one to limit sharing to other Prezi user accounts of one’s choice. Along with *what* and *to whom* one chooses to share, there is a choice as to *how* one chooses to share. The most generous “reusable” setting not only permits others to find, view and show another’s prezi, but also to obtain a modifiable copy in their own accounts. This is useful both for making necessary adaptations and for gaining under-the-hood look at how a builder created a particular effect.

My own instinct favors sharing generously. Prezi.com is a community that encourages this both in its policies and in the ability of the site to be searched. To my knowledge (and pleasure), at least one of my legal research instructional prezis has been used by a colleague elsewhere. That I am able in this article to link to exemplary prezis attests to the value of making one’s work public. Particularly because Prezi is a new technology, and one that offers such a variety of techniques to convey ideas, I would encourage you to join in.

- **Preview your early prezis with others, but not with just one other person.** If your experience is like my own, you may feel apprehensive at the prospect of displaying your first prezi to an audience, worried that your screen moves and zooms may be more annoying than stimulating. Despite its growing popularity, we are still in an era in which Prezi is unfamiliar to many. First-time viewers may find the platform a not-yet-acquired taste. Season their criticisms of your creation accordingly. Do not second-guess your design decisions until two or three colleagues have weighed in with similar reactions.
- **Download a portable copy of your prezi.** Reliance on the availability and speed of internet connectivity in a room comes with its risks, and, in my experience, the same can be said about the Prezi website. For peace of mind, take some time and download (through the Export menu item) a portable copy of your prezi once it is in final form so that you can deliver with or without the internet. This copy includes all graphic and media content along with its own executable file and does not run in a browser. You may want to

consider the portable version as the first, not the last, resort for delivering your prezi, especially if high bandwidth audio or video content is part of your presentation.

- **Listen to some B.B. King.** As a musician whose prowess as a vocalist and as an instrumentalist are near equal, B.B. King is a master of balancing those two strengths in performance. Listen to his interjection of just a few pithy guitar notes between the lines he sings to punctuate what he is singing and to whet his audience's anticipation for the eventual solo in which he will inimitably let loose. At any given moment of the performance, King leaves no doubt about whether his audience's attention should be on the guitar playing or the singing. And so it should go with the delivery of your prezi. Click your way rapidly through the prezi that accompanied Chris Anderson's TED talk.⁵ Notice how you get the inkling of a message, at best. Now watch the talk itself with the screen visible behind him,⁶ and see how seamlessly the speaker and prezi intermesh. The type and texture of the prezi's content shifts appropriately from images to video (some with sound, some silent), to catch phrases, to the occasional frame of dense text. Notice, as well, the pacing of the prezi—how long periods elapse without transitions to suit the speaker's intent of focusing the audience's attention on his words instead of the screen. To follow the B.B. King analogy through, Chris Anderson at the podium is the voice; the prezi is the guitar. The two work together to convey their message to the audience.

Notes

1. See <http://prezi.com/jchpkdo5lxs7/the-syria-crisis-how-kids-can-help> for an exemplary stand-alone prezi that demonstrates a variety of the platform's features quite elegantly.

2. If you would like to see how this is intended to look when completed, see Paul Birch, *Example for Article Readers* (July 1, 2013), http://prezi.com/hqz73ws4enxI/?utm_campaign=share&utm_medium=copy.

3. I work around the lack of italics capability by typing my citations in a word processor and then creating and uploading small screen capture images of them.

4. The Add All button includes a checkbox option to import the entire PowerPoint presentation with a sequential path already in place, effectively providing a one-step PowerPoint-to-Prezi conversion. Such activity would likely horrify many Prezi mavens who would instead prefer everyone to use the imported PowerPoint slides for copying and pasting into new, "born-in-Prezi" slides.

5. Watch TED Head Chris Anderson's Prezi, *supra* note 3.
6. Anderson, *supra* note 3.

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Trends is published by

William S. Hein & Co., Inc.

1285 Main St. / Buffalo, NY 14209

Phone: (800) 828-7571; (716) 882-2600

Fax: (716) 883-8100

Email: mail@wshein.com

ISSN 0893-6773

The complete collection of articles published
in **Trends** is available in HeinOnline
(<http://heinonline.org>)

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