

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

What's the benefit of using a placemat?

This is a non-linear and scaffolded way to present **complex information** to an audience.

Powerpoint is linear. If the audience does not like your first couple slides, game over. They check out. How often do we see this on YouTube? First, we have to skip the first few minutes because speaker is talking over a title slide about nothing of consequence. Then we view another minute or two and decide this is not the video for us.

We are in a meeting and an executive interrupts to ask a question – message back? Great question, hold on, that's coming up in a few slides, I will get to it soon. Or we try to skip ahead to slide 8, answer, and come back to slide 2.

We are in a meeting with 40 slides in our deck and we are running out of time. We start skipping slides to make it the end of deck. Are we skipping things that may be important to this audience?

We get to slide 5 and it's very crowded. We meticulously start going through every single term on the slide. Audience is bored. They didn't want this much detail about slide 5. Then we blow past slide 12 in 30 seconds. But 12 might have been important to audience.

Placemats present the entire deck in a single graphic. It's nonlinear and allows the audience to shape the presentation. Can you tell me more about this section? What's this? Is X on the placemat? This is an audience guided presentation. Audience is in control at all times.

Teachers are taught to use [scaffolding](#) with students -- "provide successive levels of temporary support that help students reach higher levels of comprehension." Audiences need this too. It's why we have agenda slides in decks. **Within 5 minutes, we can present the entire placemat at a very high level.** Then we come back and cover it a little deeper. Each layer of the scaffold, we stop for questions, hoping the audience will take over and guide us to the next topic.

Are placemats hard to present?

Very hard. You have **zero control in the presentation**. You have to memorize every word on the placemat and be able to talk about a single bullet at a deep level. We actually recommend flashcards. [Anki](#) is our program of choice. On one side of the card is a single bullet or term from the placemat. On the other side is bullets ~location on the placemat and a sentence or two describing that bullet. You may have 200+ cards to memorize.

Why do I need to memorize the placemat in extreme detail?

Whether selling a car or a \$10 million contract or yourself in a job interview, it always comes down to Q&A. Audiences know presentations are memorized. They are done over and over. But they want to test your knowledge. They will ask 3-4 questions about a very specific part of your presentation to gauge your overall understanding of the subject matter. It's a litmus test.

Placemats are built for Q&A. Start asking a question and your pencil is already on the move. Pencil comes to rest on placemat and you are already telling a story about that bullet (flashcard work). This blows audiences away. No matter what they ask, you can find it within seconds and talk at length about a single word.

There are times, early in the life of a placemat, that an audience will ask about something and it's just not on the placemat. We recommend stopping and making a note of it. Come back to office and add or edit the placemat to make it stronger. Then send a second copy to audience showing the feedback was greatly appreciated.

Do you ever get complaints that the placemat is too crowded?

I guess it's happened but is extremely rare. Most **people are visual in nature**. They want to see how slide 1 connects to slide 12 to slide 3, etc. Lines create flows of information. This greatly helps with comprehension.

Scaffolding is absolutely key to comprehension. It helps the audience "unpack" the placemat and give it meaning.

We get asked all the time... should I start presenting in the top left corner? Start in center and work out? Start at top and work my way down? No! This is Powerpoint thinking. Placemats are not linear. Audience may not want to spend 5 minutes in the upper left corner.

Do you have any tips for introducing a placemat in the meeting?

Get a really nice fly [rod tube](#). I used to have zero problems carrying these on planes. Not sure if the policy has changed?

When I enter a room with this tube, all eyes go to it. When was the last time someone brought a tube? Never. What's in there. **Audience senses this is not going to be a normal meeting**. I have had people ask me what's in the tube before I can even sit down.

Once it's rolled out, just sit quietly and **let the audience soak** in the placemat. The longer someone spends looking at a placemat without you speaking, the easier it will be to get to yes. 5 minutes? Just sit on your hands and be still. The placemat is selling itself. Then you hope for a question right out of the gate. Audience directs you to what they find interesting. Stay with the audience. Go as deep as they want on that small section.

If they do kick it over to you, **start scaffolding**. There are really X major areas on this placemat that I would like to present today. As you go through each "major" section, be anecdotal. Tell a little story. If you can use a current event to help describe one of the major areas, even better.

Then stop at the end of scaffold one. Does audience have **any questions yet**? Of the X areas, is there one you want me to focus on? You hope the audience has already interrupted you, with questions, by this time.

I always use a [nice](#) mechanical pencil in meetings, never a pen. Why? I am going to leave the placemat with the audience and the cleaner, the better. Some audiences will even erase after you leave to return it to original state. A nice pencil also gives the impression you are an architect of the placemat... an engineer...

If you had to pick a bad reaction to a placemat, what would be #1.

You are blowing smoke. There is **no way you can do all this – impossible**. Basically, they are telling you're their brains are overwhelmed and they don't see the path to getting this placemat accomplished.

You can reference blueprints for a skyscraper. They are incredibly detailed, but in practice, each member of the building crew is only interested in one small piece of the blueprint. Plumbers want one thing, HVAC another, etc. Same thing here. We have many people working on small pieces of this placemat to make it a reality.

Why do you call it a placemat?

Many years ago, I was at a Big Eight accounting firm and they presented something to Warren Buffet. Instead of a deck, they took a single 11x17 graphic, a page about the size of a placemat at a family's dinner table. Buffet was blown away. Chairman decided if **good enough for Buffet, good enough for all**.

We started using placemats, larger sizes, to fully document business-side expectations on a technology project. Get everyone on business side to agree to what will be built. Then I.T. used placemat as a roadmap. From then on, I.T. projects were delivered in scope, on time and on budget. We locked down the business until release 1.

Do certain areas lend themselves to using a placemat?

Delivering **I.T. projects** was the genesis for placemats. To this day, it is a gamechanger for I.T. It helps get the business side to agree to disagree and get to a single spec for a project. We also do **strategic** placemats. We are starting a new business unit or venture. We need to make sure everyone is on the same page. Do we all know what our role is going forward? How do we fit together?

Another area is sales. A team can use it to obtain **funding** or go out to a prospect and **sell** a product or service. For sales, it brings instant credibility and shows the salesperson is there to represent every aspect of the offering.

Why is there no color in the placemat?

It's expensive to print these large posters in full color. And, if in color, it usually comes on paper that looks like a photograph. Way too slick and hard to work with on the conference room table. Just not worth the extra cost.

Color is in the eye of the beholder. Should I be alarmed when I see red? Or is red something important that needs my attention? Why are these 5 things in green? What's the meaning? Why isn't this 6th thing green?

Blueprints for skyscrapers are not in color. Placemats are **meant to look like an architectural drawing**. Nothing on this page is more important than anything else. The most important thing? Whatever the audience wants to talk about.

Do you give the placemats to the audience after presentation?

This has been debated vigorously over the years. Some think this is giving away intellectual property. It's a roadmap. Audience can show it to a competitor or an internal team that might try and replicate the placemat.

I give them away like candy. I am hoping they will hang them on an office or conference room wall. I hope they take it back to their team and show them. I **hope they use it to make their own presentations** to more senior executives.

Does the maturity and/or sophistication of the audience matter?

We don't think so. It's ok for audience to initially be overwhelmed. It's like the first day of Algebra class. This stuff is complex. But **after scaffolding, the audience/student should start to grasp key points** and begin to ask probing questions. If the audience is not very mature in capability, we just don't scaffold down into the details of a placemat. We stop when it gets harder to understand.

If an audience is so basic, they can't grasp even the top scaffolds, getting a yes may not be desirable. You are about to enter a deal with someone who really doesn't understand what they are getting.

What if someone zones out from the very beginning? Shows zero interest?

I think getting to yes is going to be an uphill battle. They are so unwilling to even engage with understanding, even just the basics (top scaffold) of the material, the job of **getting to yes gets a lot tougher**.

One could argue that some people are just linear thinkers. They like the beginning, middle and end. They love Powerpoint and will just sit there and absorb messages, slide after slide. If this is the case, a deck can be pulled from a briefcase within seconds and the placemat can be pushed to the side. But if the audience will just give the presenter 5 minutes, it will see how scaffolding breaks the placemat into pieces and makes it more digestible.

What if someone thinks placemat is too complicated? This is too overwhelming?

Again, probably tough getting to yes. If the idea or subject matter can fit in a tweet or a series of tweets, we would never do a placemat. Placemats are for very complex subjects that require a lot of “information transfer” to the audience.

And we can always pull a 10-slide deck out of the briefcase – 10 tweet-like messages. But if the client does say yes, is the relationship going to be a good one going forward? How much time will be spent later on, explaining stuff that should have been covered before we got to yes?

What if the audience is too sophisticated for this placemat. Placemat is too basic.

I leave it rolled up and pull out complex, acronym decks for the discussion. But I still bring the placemat. And I still give it to the audience. While audience may be a genius on subject matter, I bet they still need to get budget and make presentations to peers/leaders who are not geniuses. This basic placemat can still help your audience present to their internal audiences to get you to a yes.

Does this completely replace the slide deck?

Absolutely not. You can only scaffold so deep from a single piece of paper. A placemat is an introduction to the material. Placemat is designed to help you get to a yes or no more quickly. More detail, right up to the contract, will be needed to do the deal.

If an audience really wants to dig in on one specific area and quiz you, you will be ready with the right deck in your briefcase. You will have a Calculus-level deck ready to go on 8-10+ areas of the placemat. If needed, they are only feet away.

Are there other uses for these placemats?

They can be used at conferences and tradeshows. Because they are vector graphics, they can be printed at very large scale and hung on a wall. Visitors can come by and look at it like artwork. You ask if they have any questions or would like something explained in more detail.

We have seen them used for recruiting. Here is our strategy, our project, our company. In a single meeting and graphic, I can tell you everything you need to know before joining. We have also seen them used in onboarding to help new employees better understand the company.

Some have hung them on the walls of their department to help other areas of the company understand and appreciate what that department is doing at that moment. It's a great conversation starter.

Do you send this as a PDF in advance of the meeting?

Absolutely not. This very rarely, if ever helps. We will mail a plotted copy in advance if we are having a hard time setting up a meeting. We have no problem with someone studying the placemat in advance of a meeting. It just saves us time getting to yes.

PDFs are very, very hard to read. Impossible to read. User screens are so small, they have to zoom in 1000%+ to even read anything. At this zoom level, you totally miss the connections (lines and flows) between important concepts. You are seeing scaffolding level 6 before you can even understand scaffold level one.

What if it all comes down to budget? Things always beyond your control?

This is one of the key reasons we leave the placemat at end of meeting. We will even talk about ways to use this placemat to secure budget or make presentations to internal audiences. We talked (earlier in FAQs) about presenting to a subject matter expert (genius). We may still unroll the placemat, and while too basic for genius, brainstorm ways this can be used to help sell the genius's message internally.

How important is the presenter?

Of course, very important. Percentage? Hard to say. A huge challenge is if the presenter did not author the original placemat. Presenter has to “replicate” the entire creation process and put themselves in those shoes. This is why we recommend flashcards. The more it’s memorized, the more presenter will feel like a stakeholder in the placemat.

Placemats most often fail when the pencil is not moving fast enough. Or the audience asks a question and the presenter stumbles with an answer. While we cannot offer percentages on importance, we can say that a presenter with a deep understanding of the placemat can increase his/her value by 20%+.

I get the idea of a placemat. But I am still ready to give up on using it.

That’s more than ok. We keep talking about the different types of audiences, but the presenter’s style matters just as much. If the placemat cannot fit with the presenter, it will do more harm than good.

If instead, it’s a flashcard issue. Just so complex and a firehose of information to transfer, you may consider breaking the placemat into 4-5 different placemats and stapling them together. Audience only sees the basics. We cover the basics, together, first. Then we turn the page and see more detail. Then we do it again. At 4th page, presenter and audience have arrived at the same place.