

Visual Aids

Visual aids are most useful when they *enhance* your presentation. Visual aids should not *be* your presentation. Use only as many visual aids as are necessary to effectively transmit your information. More than about one visual aid every minute is probably too many. The speech and the information are the reason that the audience is there, not the visual aids. Too many visual aids are distracting and often suggest that the speaker's arguments are weak.

General Guidelines for Using Visual Aids (VAs)

- The purpose of visual aids is to provide an additional channel of information to enhance your delivery and message.
- Visual aids should *aid* the message not *be* the speech. Speeches should not consist of reading visual aids to an audience. Be sure to refer to, and use, the visual aids that you have or do not use them. Items that are just leaned against the wall, or hung from hooks are props not VAs.
- Visual aids should be simple, balanced, and legible from the back of the room. Visibility usually requires 3–5" or larger letters for signs and an 18 point font or larger for overheads.
- Include only as much detail as needed. Use multiple visual aids rather than cramming everything into a one table, graph, sign, etc. More specifically, do not take VAs that were created for another purpose and use them in your own presentation without creating your own tables/charts specific to your purpose.
- Black on white or black on yellow (caution signs) are the most visible color combinations. Do not use color just for the sake of using it. Do not use severe colors like Hot Pink or Safety Orange in professional settings. Use color only if it increases the visibility, clarity, quality, or credibility of your message.
- Charts, graphs, tables, etc. are often created with color in increase clarity and increase contrast. Be sure to limit yourself to only a *few* colors. Do not create pie charts that have ten different colored slices.
- Plan ahead and learn how to operate all of the equipment that you will use. Be sure that the equipment is in working order before you begin. Make sure cabinets are unlocked, and you have experience operating the equipment before you begin.
- Plan how visual aids will be used ahead of time: placed on tripods, clipped to a board, taped/tacked, stand alone, etc. Bring your own equipment/supplies. Avoid having to improvise when you arrive. Do not expect the chalk tray to work effectively as a prop for your posters—they never do.
- Place your visual aids so that *everyone* can see them. Talk to your audience and not the visual aid, board, overhead projector, screen, sign, etc.
- An old visual aid trick is to place notes on the back of your posters/signs, so that you can stand to the side, or behind, your VA and speak eloquently "without notes."
- When a visual aid has served its purpose get rid of it—turn the projector off, cover or remove posters or signs, etc.

- When you refer to something on a visual aid, point directly to it with a pointer, your finger, a light pen, a pen on the overhead projector, etc. Do not make your audience search the VA for the word/thing/place that you are referring to.
- Clothes are not visual aids. Clothing is a prop. Hats, coats, belt buckles, etc., worn during presentations are not visual aid. A Gi, tutu, Ninja suit, etc. might be.

Guidelines for Each Type of Visual Aid

- *Slideware/PowerPoint:* Arrive well ahead of time to set up and test your equipment. Never waste the audience's time while you prepare the equipment. Arrange to have equipment ready before you arrive, or bring an assistant to set up while you start.

When using equipment that is not your own, bring your content on a flash drive or CD. Never assume the computer will have a floppy drive, most do not come with them any more. Bring paper copies of your content for when the equipment mal-functions (which happens all the time) and so people can follow along and take notes. Turn the projector off when it is no longer needed they often generate a lot of white noise making presenters harder to hear.

Note: Do not assume that the computer you expect to use will have the latest version of your Slideware program (i.e., PowerPoint 2007 in 2007). Be sure to save slideshows in a compatible (earlier) version to flash drives if you will not be using your own computer, or as PDFs/RTFs files. See note below on overhead formatting.

- *Models:* When objects are too small/large to be used effectively, use a scale model. You cannot bring the actual space shuttle, an F-16, the enterprise, a blood sucking alien, an atom, a microprocessor, etc. into class, but you can bring a scale model.
- *Pictures/diagrams:* Pictures illustrate nouns; diagrams illustrate relationships. Use these to simplify/clarify objects, machines, processes, ideas, locations, etc.
- *Overheads:* There are several techniques: (1) Draw/write as you talk. This technique is hard to master and can be distracting. However, this technique is useful for holding attention throughout a presentation. (2) Draw/write ahead of time. This technique is more effective but the quality is generally poor and only as good as your artistic ability and penmanship. (3) Printing from a computer produces high quality, more durable, overheads.

1. Place overheads in clear page protectors for longer life.
2. Overheads can be used as overlays to show the progression of something either forward or backward in time.
3. Be sure to arrange your overheads in order before you arrive.
4. Master the overhead machine before you arrive.
5. Turn the projector on/off as needed. Do not leave it running, they are loud.

Note: Overheads are formatted tall not wide, like data projectors (PowerPoint). You cannot just print out Slideware slides and use them on an overhead, they will not fit. Be sure you format content properly for the type of technology used.

- *Video:* (1) All video requires set up which takes time away from your presentation; (2) High quality, entertaining, video often takes attention/interest away from the speaker; (3) Clips should be prepped before use to avoid surfing for desired scenes.

- *Signs* that were made for other purposes are rarely appropriate. Signs often contain too much extraneous information and irrelevant content. The best signs are made specifically for an occasion.
- *Handouts*: Do not distribute *during* presentations. However, for long presentations and training, handouts may be used effectively *within* presentations. For short presentations, distribute handouts before a presentation begins or after it.
- *Posters/Flip charts*: (1) Inexpensive to produce, easy to make. (2) Versatile for dramatic effects (throwing pages back, tearing pages off). (3) Notes, or cues, (not your whole speech), may be put on the back (or duplicates of the front) so that you do not have to “read” off the visual aid when you should be speaking to your audience.
- *Objects*: Should be small/large enough to be manageable: avoid things like bugs, goos, small/large animals, dangerous objects, and things you would be unhappy not to get back. Valuable pass-arounds often disappear in large crowds.

Common Problems with Slideware (e.g., PowerPoint)

Historical note: Slideware was first introduced by Macintosh as “Hyper-Card” in the late 80s. Then, slideware was intended to be a creative endeavor useful for training or tutorials and not as the basis for a presentation. What Microsoft did with PowerPoint was to reverse the process of visual support of presentations—to support a message—and transform presentations into support for simplistic ideas. When using slideware be sure that the content is used to support your message rather than creating messages to support the slides.

- *Too many special effects*: Like good typesetting, slideware is best when it seamlessly blends into the background. Special effects (dissolves, sounds, etc.) only serve to distract the viewer and draw attention to the slideware rather than the content. Use simple, quiet, unobtrusive special effects or none at all.
- *The presenter talks to or reads off the screen or computer monitor*: Speeches/presentations should involve interaction with the audience. A presenter should gauge nonverbals and body language and monitor whether the audience is grasping the message and interested in the contents. Most slideware presentations involve the presenter reading what is written on the slides to the audience (who have already read the slides themselves, since we read five times faster than people talk). Do not read your speech or deliver it to the screen on the wall. Deliver your message to the audience! Create notes rather than reading to the audience from the slides. Alternatively, use the slideware only to present key words/ideas that you will elaborate on or use the slideware content as “extemporaneous” notes.
- *Content is too thin*: Most slideware presentations follow the five by five rule: five-lines, five-words-per-line. If the content is so simplistic that it can be reduced to 25 words (or a few seconds of silent reading), then you probably do not need slideware at all. Since most professional topics are more complex, the slideware should only be used to supplement the verbal channel or to serve as a mnemonic device rather than new content. In the old days, presenters used slide projectors and overhead projectors for this purpose. Slideware replaces both of those mediums but the use is similar. Do not use the slideware presentation as a tool to *not* talk to the audience. Slideware simply adds a visual or auditory channel to presentation content.

- *The slideware content is the presentation:* A majority of slideware presentations consist of nothing more than what is on the slides with a few words added here and there. Again, if all you that have to say can be reduced to a few hundred words of text then you do not have anything to say and you do not need slideware. Be sure that the slideware *supplements* your presentation and is not *the* presentation.

Common Problems with Visual Aids

- *Visual aids were too small or hard to see:* Use 3–5" letters, or an 18-point font on overheads/slideware.
- *Visual aids failed to serve the intended purpose:* Putting up a visual aid that is never referred to is a waste of time. If a visual aid is not mentioned, you do not need it.
- *Additional visual aids would have helped:* Do not skimp. If it takes three visual aids to illustrate your point then make them. Do not make 30, however.
- *The visual aid was really just an object of discussion* and not a visual aid per se: Visual aid are supposed to *aid*, or enhance, a presentation and not just be there to be pointed at or touched unless some point in the speech is facilitated by this.
- *The subject was too complex for the time frame:* The more complicated a visual aid is, the less useful it is likely to be. Listeners often are not given time to study complex relationships, charts, or diagrams. If you give out a handout or have a complicated visual aid, your audience will scrutinize the document and try to understand the visual aid rather than *your message*. Spend some time explaining the material. If the VA requires close study to understand the message, your visual aid may not be suitable.
- *Subject treated with haste:* Do not *assume* that your visual aid speaks for itself. Although it *should*, you still need to discuss/explain your point. Again, if there is no need to refer to the VA directly, you probably did not need the VA at all.
- *Visual aid not used to its fullest potential:* Do not create visual aids just to have them. Use them to *enhance* what you are saying.
- *More practice needed with visual aid:* Many people do not practice with their actual visual aids before giving a speech. Inevitably, you will wind up fumbling with your VAs, trying to get them to stand up, having difficulty using the overhead, etc. if you do not practice using VAs before the speech.
- *Visual aid was cheesy or not useful as an attention-getter:* Make an effort to create visual aids as “high-quality” as possible. High quality does not mean *expensive* but it does mean that you took some time drafting or lettering your visual aid. Graphics that are cheesy, rushed, or obviously “whipped-out at the last-minute” only damage your credibility.