

## **Using Visual Support in Oral Presentations**

James Helmer, Oral Communication Center, Hamilton College

- I. Basic Principle of Oral Presentation
  - A. Three Key Factors: *the Speaker, the Audience, the Situation*
    - 1. *The Speaker*: His/her goals, skills, responsibilities, interests, ethics, etc.
    - 2. *The Audience*: Their self-interest, roles, knowledge, priorities, etc.
    - 3. *The Situation*: The task, occasion, physical & social environment, etc.
  - B. These factors should guide all of the decisions the speaker makes regarding the content, design, and style of visual elements of the presentation.
- II. Making the Decision to Use Visual Support
  - A. Are visual aids required? Are they customary or expected?
  - B. Will visuals help achieve the goals of the presentation?
  - C. Will visuals enhance audience interest, understanding, or retention?
- III. Basic Issues in Using Visual Support
  - A. What elements of content will be enhanced by visual display?
    - 1. Structural elements (previews and summaries)
    - 2. Conceptual elements (arguments, issues, or procedures and their support: explanations, statistics, definitions, testimony, comparisons, examples)
  - B. What type of visual support is most suitable for those content elements?
    - 1. Object, artifact, model
    - 2. Outline, diagram, chart, table, graph, map
    - 3. Images, video clips
  - C. Considering audience and situation, what media are most appropriate for the types of visual support to be used?
    - 1. Poster, flip chart, chalkboard, handouts?
    - 2. Overhead projector, slide projector?
    - 3. PowerPoint or similar computer software?

IV. Best practices for the use of all types of visual media

- A. Select media that are appropriate for the size, layout, seating, and technological capabilities of the space.
- B. Select media that are appropriate for the nature of the situation (e.g., formality, speaker-audience relationship, institutional culture).
- C. Display visuals only when they are relevant; don't let them become distractions. Keep this principle in mind when planning the use of handouts.
- D. Integrate visual support with what is being said. With some types of visuals—such as film clips and complex data graphics—it is helpful to tell your audience what they're going to see before you show them.
- E. Make visuals meaningful for listeners: point out what is important; explain the meaning of columns and rows in tables,  $x$  and  $y$  axes of graphs, units of measurement, pictorial symbols, etc.
- F. Talk to the audience, not to visuals.

V. Best practices for the use of PowerPoint

- A. Avoid putting the entire presentation on slides.
- B. Design slides with restraint. Make judicious use of color, fonts, and animation.
- C. Design slides for ease of reading and comprehension.
  - 1. Use fonts that are large enough.
  - 2. Include all relevant data, but eliminate clutter.
  - 3. Eliminate unnecessary text.
  - 4. Choose text and background colors for good contrast.
  - 5. Follow a consistent design (format or style, fonts and colors)
  - 6. Clearly label columns, rows, axes, etc.
- D. Cite the source on every slide where borrowed material appears.
- E. Design and use slides to help guide audience attention.
  - 1. Show a slide only when it's relevant.
  - 2. Use gesture or a pointer to focus audience attention.
  - 3. *Consider* using progressive disclosure (a.k.a. text build), but don't get carried away with animation.

- F. Use special visual or audio effects *only* if they serve your purpose and *do not call attention to themselves*.
- G. Avoid reading from the slides.
- H. Integrate PowerPoint with the oral presentation.
  - 1. Clearly connect what's on the screen with what's being said.
  - 2. Point out what the audience should be seeing and explain what it means.
  - 3. Provide ample context, explanation, and elaboration.
  - 4. Summarize the key material on complex slides before moving on.
  - 5. When necessary, supplement PowerPoint with other forms of visual support, such as handouts.
- I. Provide oral transitions between ideas and between slides.
  - 1. Transitions clarify relationships.
  - 2. Transitions enhance flow and unity.
- J. Avoid use of PowerPoint slides as the *only* residue of a presentation to be published, posted to a website, or taken away by the audience.