Using Visual Aids

There are effective and ineffective ways to use visual aids in presentations. Ineffective use is very common in both academia and industry. Good visuals used in the right way can help your audience stay attentive and retain information. The tips below will help you decide when and how to effectively use overhead projectors and slides, blackboards, handouts, and computer programs like PowerPoint. You may also wish to see the Teachings Tips sheet called “Designing Visual Aids.”

1) Use visuals when they will help your audience

To make visuals effective, use them to:

- focus the audience’s attention
- reinforce the key components of your verbal message
- stimulate and maintain interest
- illustrate complex concepts that are difficult to visualize
- aid the audience’s comprehension
- increase retention

Avoid using them to:

- impress your audience with overly-detailed text, charts, or animations – avoid information overload
- limit interaction with your audience
- present simple ideas that are easily stated verbally
- serve as your cue cards

2) Select appropriate visual aids and equipment

Elaborate does not necessarily mean effective. It can be tempting to spend more time preparing visual aids than presentation content. The result may be insubstantial and distracting – and the higher the technology, the more things can go wrong. The following tips will help you choose appropriate visual aids and equipment:

- consider giving your audience context via a handout before the presentation
- have a “plan B” visual aid: bulbs burn out, screens fall down, and computers crash
- weigh the pros and cons before using computer programs like PowerPoint:

**PowerPoint pros:**
- potentially inexpensive
- attractive designs
- smooth transitions between slides
- possible to add/subtract material (parts of charts, graphs) from slides

**PowerPoint cons:**
- complicated equipment required
- hassle to set up
- special effects often distracting
- time-consuming to prepare except for experienced users
3) Interact with your audience and make sure YOU remain their focus

Presenters may be tempted to hide behind (or lose themselves in) their visual aids. It is important to maintain contact with your audience and remember that you, not your visual aids, are giving the presentation. At best, visual aids are an accessory – you should remain the centre of attention. The following tips will help:

- remember to ask questions, stimulate discussions, and use other interactive methods as appropriate
- maintain eye contact with your audience
- watch out for facial cues of boredom, confusion, falling behind, etc.
- remember that visual aids are aids *for your audience*: lecture notes are aids for you
- assume that your audience will copy everything from your visual aids: keep information on visual aids minimal, and keep it visible for long enough
- if possible, position overhead projectors and screens diagonally to the front of the class: thus, you can occupy the room’s focal point instead of having to stand aside. Consider ordering a free portable screen from the Audio-Visual Centre (Ext. 3031)

4) Prepare and be organized

Preparation and organization can make the difference between a successful and a frustrating presentation. The following tips can help:

- computers may be ruined in areas of excessive chalk dust
- before the presentation, check lines of sight to your visual aids from all parts of the seating area: use only those areas that will be visible to all audience members
- before the presentation, experiment with arrangements of furniture and visual aids
- place overhead slides in a pile in order, right side up before the presentation
- test overhead projectors and screens in advance to focus and find the right distance for the projector to fill the screen
- turn off overhead projectors when you’ve finished with a slide if you don’t intend to present another one shortly – the fan and glaring white screen are distracting
- you’re better off without any visual aid about which you think you will say, “You don’t need to worry about this material,” “Ignore this,” “This probably doesn’t make sense to you,” or, “You probably can’t see this at the back.”

See also the Teaching Tips sheet “Designing Visual Aids”

*(Adapted from the TRACE TA workshop on “Visual Aids: Design and Use”)*