



Effective Computer-Generated Visuals for Presentations

1

Ricky Telg, Ph.D.²

Does the following scenario sound familiar to you? You enter a room where the lights are dimmed slightly to listen to an expert in your field. The speaker begins to address the audience. She uses a projector to cast images from her computer. But try as you may, you can't decipher much of the text on the projection screen. The room is too bright, the words on the screen are too cramped, and the dark-colored lettering blends in with the dark background. You spend most of the presentation trying to determine what the projected materials say, instead of listening to the speech.

Because computers and high-end projectors are commonplace, presentations like this happen all of the time, but they don't have to. Poorly developed projected visuals distract your audience's attention from what's important – your presentation. This fact sheet details ways to make your presentations more effective by using correctly produced computer-generated visuals. With this information, your presentations should be “distraction-free.”

Computer Slides

Beside the content of the speech itself, the text is the most important part of a computer-supported presentation. But, as described earlier, if you can't

read what the words say because they are difficult to see, the visual is useless. Following are some guidelines to consider as you develop computer-generated slides:

- **Contrasting colors.** The use of contrasting colors is an **extremely** important consideration when developing computer-projected visuals. Use a dark background with light letters or a light background with dark letters. Avoid backgrounds with dark and light colors swirled together. Light-colored lettering is difficult to read when it crosses onto light backgrounds; similarly, dark-colored lettering is difficult to distinguish when it blends with a dark background. New versions of computer presentation software include many light/dark swirled backgrounds as templates.
- **Letter colors to use.** Use white or yellow letters on a dark background or black letters on a white or light-colored background.
- **Letter colors to avoid.** Red is the number one color to avoid, especially if you use a dark background. Red tends to bleed into other colors, making text difficult to read. Avoid colors that are similar to each other. For

1. This document is AEC349, a publication of the Department of Agricultural Education and Communication, Florida Cooperative Extension Service, Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences, University of Florida. Publication date: July 2000. Please visit the EDIS Web site at <http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu>.
2. Ricky Telg, Professor, Department of Agricultural Education and Communication, Florida Cooperative Extension Service, Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences, University of Florida, Gainesville, FL 32611.

example, reds and dark greens are difficult to distinguish when projected.

- **Text size.** Use a minimum font size of 32 points. Bigger (up to 48-point) is better.
- **Number of words/lines.** Just because you can cram many lines of text onto one slide doesn't mean you should. Too many words on a screen make the information difficult to read. A good rule is to limit words to six per line and six lines per screen. Information is best presented using "bullet" points or key words.
- **Easy-to-read font style.** Fonts that are *sans serif*, without the lines on the ends of each letter, will be easier to read on a projected screen. Helvetica, CG Omega, and Arial are examples of sans serif fonts.
- **Italics.** On your office's computer screen, italicized words are easy to read. But when they are projected, audiences find it difficult to make out italicized words, so avoid italics.
- **Upper/lowercase.** It is difficult to read all upper-case letters. A **combination** of lower-case and upper-case letters should be used.

Bells and Whistles

New versions of computer presentation software come with lots of special effects for transitions between slides and for audio. The overall rule is to use special effects only when necessary. Special effects should have a purpose.

- **Audio effects.** Use sparingly! Audio special effects can make a serious presentation seem humorous when it's not supposed to be. PowerPoint has such audio effects as a racing car, breaking glass, lasers, and a typewriter. Ask yourself: "Why do I need one of these effects?" If you can't answer the question with a meaningful reason, then don't use the audio effect.
- **Reveals and transitions.** New software offers many choices of text reveals and transitions, ranging from text that dissolves onto the screen to text that "zooms" on from the right, left, bottom or top. Again, use sparingly. Your

audience may get so enamored with the reveals and transitions that they lose sight of the main points in your presentation.

- **Random effects.** Avoid the use of "random effects" for reveals and transitions. You don't know how text will appear onto the screen in the "random effects" mode. For example, one of PowerPoint '97's effects is "crawl." If it is one of the chosen "random effects," you can expect to wait a long time for your bullet point of information to appear completely as it slowly crawls on the screen.
- **Clip art, photographs, and graphics.** Think "purpose." Ensure that clip art, photographs, and graphics pertain to your slide. If the clip art, photograph, or graphic doesn't further the audience's comprehension of your presentation, then don't use it. Include visuals that tell your story.

Environment

The presentation's site must be taken into consideration as you prepare your computer-generated visuals.

Preparation. Run through the presentation in the room you're going to give it in **before** you are supposed to give it. Make adjustments to the slides accordingly.

Lighted room. If a room's light level cannot be dimmed satisfactorily, try this: Use a white background with black or dark letters. Like traditional overhead projectors that have bright lights, a white (or extremely light) background projected through a high-end computer projector is more easily readable to your audience.

By following these tips, you should be on your way to making your presentations better with effective computer-projected visuals.