



Using Visual Aids in Extension Presentations¹

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The quality and clarity of visuals are major factors in determining the effectiveness of an oral presentation. By using visuals effectively, you will grab the viewer's attention and focus it on the important points. However, with visuals that are difficult to read, you may end up with an audience squinting and straining to see and failing to get the points you are trying to make. Good visuals are essential for effective teaching, and the proper development and use of visual aids are important to successful teaching. Your audience will expect professionally developed, competently utilized, and message-supporting visual aids. This publication is designed to help you use and develop effective visuals in Extension presentations.

Definition

A visual aid is anything the audience can see that helps the speaker get his or her message across to the audience. While this definition sounds simple, it provides the foundation to measure the effectiveness of visual aids. You should always ask yourself these two questions when using visuals:

1. Will the audience be able to see the visual aid?
2. Will the visual aid help get my point across to the audience?

If the answer to these questions is not an emphatic YES, the visual should not be used because it will detract from rather than support your message.

Why Use Visual Aids?

The primary reason for using visual aids is to help speakers get their message effectively communicated to their audience. In addition, there are other reasons for using visuals, namely:

- **The audience's attention is focused more completely.** The ebb and flow of the audience's attention is inevitable. The challenge for the speaker is to direct the audience's attention at strategic periods. Visual aids provide one mechanism to direct and focus attention.
- **Visual aids make you more persuasive.** A 2000 joint study by 3-M and Presentations Magazine found that presenters using computer-generated visuals (multimedia) had more credibility, demonstrated greater professionalism, and proved to be more persuasive than individuals using overhead slides or text.
- **The receiver retains the message better.** Research has clearly shown that people retain more of what they see and hear compared to

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what they simply see. For example, research has found that message retention after three days is only 10% following oral presentation, but is 65% following an oral and visual presentation.

- **The message is transmitted more efficiently.** The adage, "A picture is worth a thousand words" is true. If you want the audience to understand how trickle irrigation is used in vegetable gardening, your message will be transmitted better if the audience can see the components of trickle irrigation. This can be done using overhead transparencies, a field trip to see an actual garden with trickle irrigation, or showing the actual irrigation components during your talk.
- **People have come to expect visuals.** Today's world is very visual compared to just a few decades ago. The average person is visually oriented and accustomed to visual presentations. Thus, a strictly oral presentation is boring to the majority of the people.
- **Visual aids help establish organization for presentations.** One of the most effective uses of visual aids is establishing overall organization for the presentation. Audiences look for order in everything they experience. Organization aids comprehension and retention. If the structure of a presentation is shown at the beginning of a presentation, a cognitive framework is established for what is to come. If the visuals outlining the presentation are used throughout the program, it will also aid in organizing the new material as it is presented.
- **Visual aids add variety and emphasis to your presentation.** Effective teachers use a variety of different teaching methods and techniques as they teach. Visual aids help provide variety.
- **Your message is presented both aurally and visually.** Some people process information best by hearing it; others process it best by seeing it. When you use visual aids with a presentation, you communicate with both types of people.
- **Visuals help you to be concise.** You are forced to distill your ideas down to their essence when

using visuals. Visuals force you to order and sequence the ideas you will present.

Types of Visuals

There are two categories of visual aids: standard visual aids and electronically enhanced visual aids.

Standard Visual Aids

- **The human body.** This probably represents the most important and frequently used visual aid of all, though many fail to consider it when visual aids are discussed. During your presentation you will use gestures, facial expressions, and other body movements which are effective in helping you get your message across to your audience. If you demonstrate how to graft a citrus tree or how to prune a hedge, you will also use your body as a visual aid.
- **Actual objects.** A physical object has the advantage of exactness and realism.
- **Models of actual objects.** When certain characteristics of physical objects, such as their size or complexity, make their use inappropriate, then models of such objects might serve the same purpose. A cutaway model of the diesel engine would probably better serve most presentations than the actual engine, since the engine's interior could be studied in much greater detail.
- **Posters and flip charts.** Posters and flip charts are very effective for summarizing information. Care should be taken to ensure that graphs and charts are as simple as possible and large enough to see.
- **Photographs and pictures.** These aids serve basically the same purpose as physical models. The photographs must be quite large for ease of viewing by the entire audience. They are not practical for use in large groups.
- **Maps.** Certain presentations require the use of maps, such as talks on travel, international affairs, weather, and the location of various activities within a county.

- **Chalkboard.** The chalkboard is an extremely accessible and popular visual aid. It is available in most public-speaking and teaching environments. The chalkboard allows unlimited flexibility and spontaneous modification. One problem is that it is too often used as a substitute for greater creativity and preparation on the part of the speaker. The speaker should not address the audience while writing on the board. Write neatly and large enough for the entire audience to see.

Electronically Enhanced Visual Aids

- **Overhead transparencies.** Overhead transparencies are an effective and commonly used visual aid. They can be used in large and small meetings that are formal or informal.
- **35mm slides.** Slides represent an easily manageable and elegant visual format. Slides allow you to bring realism into your presentation.
- **Videotape.** Videotape should be used when teachers want to present information that entails moving video. Professionally produced videotapes on a wide variety of subjects can be rented or purchased for educational purposes. Also, educators may wish to shoot their own video, using video camcorders, to show in classroom or Extension settings. Refer to the Extension fact sheet "Producing Your Own Video Program" and "Producing an Educational Video."
- **Computer-generated slides/graphics.** Computer-generated slides are similar to overhead transparencies in that they can provide textual information through the use of a computer (usually a laptop) and a computer projector. However, computer-generated slides also can encompass scanned-in photographs and slides, clip art, audio clips, and video segments. Interactive World Wide Web pages also can be included in computer-generated slide pages. For more information on how to develop computerized visuals, refer to the Extension fact sheet "Effective Computer-Generated Visuals for Presentations."

Using Visual Aids

The more senses you can have the audience use, the more effective your communication will be. If you lecture, the only sense the audience will be using is hearing. If you lecture and use visual aids, the audience will use their senses of sight and sound. If you use a demonstration, the audience will see, hear, touch, and possibly even smell and taste.

The following guidelines should be followed as you use visual aids:

- **Show visual aids only when you are talking about them.** Visual aids compete with you for attention. When you use a visual aid to help make a point, you expect the audience's attention to be directed to the visual aid. Therefore, after the point is made, the audience's attention should focus back to you. If the visual aid is still in view when you are talking about something else, the audience's attention will be split between you and the visual. So, when the visual is not helping make the point that you are trying to make, keep it out of sight so your audience's attention is not distracted.
- **Talk about the visual aid while you are showing it.** A visual aid is not meant to stand alone; you need to explain to the audience what to look for. Once you have done this, remove it from view.
- **Talk to audience, not the visual aid. One of the most common procedures encountered while using visual aids is looking at and talking to the visual aid, rather than the audience.** You will need to look at the visual aid occasionally, but you must maintain eye contact with the audience. Be sure that you know the content of the visual well enough so that you don't have to study it while you talk. One of the worst things you can do is read your visuals to a group.
- **Be sure that everyone in the audience can see the visual aid.** If the seating arrangement is such that certain audience members might have difficulty seeing, then rearrange the seating, use another type of visual, or make other

arrangements so each member of the audience can see. If the item you need to show is small, you may use a video camera and a series of video monitors to show the object. You might also use an overhead projector and transparency to show it.

- **Do not pass objects around the audience while you are speaking.** It is tempting for speakers to pass an object around in the audience while they are speaking. This should not be done because it distracts the audience and prevents one or more people from paying attention to you. Your audience will look at the object, read it, handle it, and think about it. If you must pass items out to the audience, have enough for everyone. Tell audience members when to look at it, what to look for, and when to put it away so they can again focus their attention on you and your message.
- **Practice using the visual aid before using it in a presentation.** One of the common pitfalls in using visual aids is assuming that you can effectively use the visual and audio-visual equipment. Even though most visuals are easy to use and most audio-visual equipment is relatively easy to operate, don't underestimate the problems that can arise. It is important to practice using visuals in exactly the way you plan to use them when you make your presentation. This is especially important when using multi-media presentations.
- **Do not overuse visual aids.** Don't feel as though every point to be made has to be reinforced with visual aids; simply make the major points with visuals. Visual aids may become security blankets if overused.
- **Coordinate audio and visual.** This takes some practice, but it is critical to the success of your presentation. Always deliver the audio message at the same moment as the visual message, and make certain they are compatible. This will give the message maximum impact and help audience members absorb the information because they're hearing and seeing the message.

- **Using "reveals".** This is important when using word slides. If you show audience members a slide with six lines of type, they will want to read everything on the slide at once. Thus, they are not paying attention to what you are saying. Gradually reveal the information on the slide by showing only one line at a time as it is discussed.

Selecting Visual Aids

Consideration when choosing which type of visual aid to use in a particular presentation is dependent upon the following:

- *The purpose of the presentation.* If there are specific points to be highlighted, then a transparency or word slide might be appropriate. If the procedure is of utmost importance, then a model or physical demonstration might be needed.
- *The nature of the audience.* What the audience knows about the subject will determine the types of visual aids that are most appropriate. For a presentation on diseases of vegetables to a group of homeowners with limited knowledge about gardening, it would be appropriate to have real plant specimens and slides. But for commercial vegetable farmers who have good knowledge of diseases, perhaps you would only need slides to illustrate your point.
- *The physical setting.* The shape, size, lighting, and equipment available in the particular environment are major considerations. Will the seating arrangement allow everyone to see the visual aids being used? If total darkness is required, is it possible? Are there enough electrical outlets for the equipment to be used? Is there an overhead projector available? A slide projector? The physical setting should be explored well before the presentation date. Time allowed for the presentation is also critical. If a short time frame is allowed, then fewer visual aids which require little explanation should be used.
- *The presenter's skill in using visual aids.* Only use aids with which you feel comfortable. Don't try to use multi-media for the very first time during an important presentation. Any visual aid

should fit naturally into the presentation. It should not draw excessive attention to itself or be the main focus of the presentation.

Designing Visuals

We have discussed the use of visuals and importance of visuals. Good message design is also important. Over the years, educators have found several design principles we can use to enhance visuals. These major principles are presented below:

- *Simplicity.* You should ask yourself this question: Are there any unnecessary words, symbols, or ideas? The number of points to be made should be limited; key words should be shown instead of complete sentences. As a general rule, a visual should have: one idea;
 - no more than eight items; about six words per line;
 - mixed upper and lower case letters;
 - simple, clean typefaces; and
 - large enough type to be read easily.

Be sure to avoid useless decoration, eliminate fancy borders and backgrounds, and use artwork selectively. Also, leave a lot of white space.

- *Harmony.* The elements of the visual should fit together in a harmonious relationship. Distracting visual elements might include color, layout, type style, visual symbols, or background. Associating pictures with names sometimes helps relationships become more concrete. Only one or two type styles should be used during a presentation unless they are used for special effects. Simple lettering styles should be used.
- *Emphasis.* The use of color, arrows, underlining, and bolding are ways to emphasize the major elements in a visual. To attract attention, extreme colors of red and blue may be used. Visuals that vary in size, coloring, brightness, and shape attract more interest than visuals that remain the same for an entire

presentation. Novel visuals also help gain audience attention.

- *Readability.* The lettering on the visual must be legible. When the content suggests a list, use numbers or bullets. The visual list is better retained than the same information presented as part of a sentence. Legibility can also be improved by mixing upper- and lower-case letters.
- *Organization.* The visual should be arranged in a pattern that is easy for the viewer to comprehend. Visuals should use arrows, numbers, underlining, and other visual cues to organize how the audience will perceive the content.
- *Balance.* The elements of the visual should be arranged in a manner which is interesting but not distracting.
- *Unity.* Are the elements of the visual arranged so they form a single unit?
- *Clarity.* Is the purpose of the visual obvious to the audience for whom the message is intended? You should logically organize the visuals, divide complex information into smaller units, and present important information more than once.

Guidelines for Charts

Here are a few simple guidelines for commonly used charts:

- **Text Charts**
 - Keep titles and subtitles to a single line.
 - Present only one main idea.
 - Keep simple.
 - Use key words.
 - Use both upper and lower case letters.
 - Maximum of 25 letters per line.
 - Maximum of eight lines per chart.

- Leave a blank line between statements.
- Maximum of eight words per line.
- Make sure bullet types do not clash with other graphics.
- Show the audience one line at a time.

• **Pie Charts**

- Try to use no more than eight slices.
- Place the largest data slice at the top of the pie.
- Place labels on or next to the slice and keep them short.
- Do not explode more than 1 slice of the pie.

• **Bar Charts**

- Use no more than eight bars.
- To emphasize a single bar, change its color or add a shadow.
- Round off numbers.
- Use key words.
- Double space between lines.

Summary

Remember to make sure that the audience can see the visuals and that the visuals will help you make the points you want to make. Also, when you make visuals, try to keep them simple and readable. The effective use of visual aids will make you a better presenter.