Tips for Teaching Effective Uses of Visual Aids in an Oral Presentation

including presentation software (i.e., PowerPoint, Slides, Keynote, etc.)

**Tip #1**:   
Labels matter. When assigning students a presentation in which visual aids are required, avoid calling it a “PowerPoint presentation.” Instead, assign them an oral presentation/speech, and, if the desire is to have them use presentation software of some kind, then make one requirement of the assignment to use a visual aid effectively during the speech. Students have a preconceived notion of what they think a “PowerPoint presentation” is, and it is not what we want them to produce.

The first step to using presentation software correctly is to understand that it is *only a tool*, and never should have been elevated into our cultural thinking as a genre or type of speech unto itself. (There is truly nothing unique about PowerPoint in this sense; it ultimately accomplishes exactly what flip charts or transparencies did for decades prior.)

The way instructors talk about this affects the outcome; consider the fact that no one was ever prescribed to conduct a “large piece of paper presentation,” or a “transparency presentation,” or an “ELMO presentation” *as an oral form of communication* when those were the available tools of visual aids.[[1]](#endnote-1)

**Tip #2:**

Stress to students that presentation software *is not preparation software.* They should not even open a “PowerPoint” file until after they already know what they plan to say to the audience. The single biggest mistake people currently make is writing the speech “in” PowerPoint. This is backwards. The speech should be prepared and outlined prior even to thinking about using PowerPoint. Then, it should be clear when and how PowerPoint is actually needed. PowerPoint, et.al., is for making visual aids, *not* for speech writing.

**Tip #3:**  
Teach students the real purpose of visual aids.

1. Visual aids need to be *visual*. That is, speakers should only use a visual aid to illustrate concepts where words alone are insufficient to convey the message effectively. *Words are not visual (even if they’re projected onto a large screen.)* Words are verbal. Images, photos, graphs, charts, etc., are visual. Keep these concepts clear.
2. Visual aids are called visual *aids* because they support some component of the presentation. Putting one’s speaking outline on presentation slides serves no purpose, but it does cause the audience to read the same few words over and over again instead of listening to the speaker.
3. Visual aids need to be designed to enhance audience comprehension. They should be quickly interpretable and understandable as evidence. They should be *meaningful* to the audience within the overall purpose of the oral presentation. Well-designed visual aids clarify a difficult to understand concept or enhance an argument.

**Tip #4:**   
Teach students how best to design visual aids.

1. One concept per visual aid. Visual aids need to be clear and quickly understandable. Trying to do more than one task per visual aid will confuse the audience.
2. Never have more than 6 *objects* of any kind on a visual aid. The old (completely arbitrary) “rule” about 7 lines of bulleted text with 7 words or fewer is wrong. That would be 49 words on one slide! This violates the most basic rule of visual aids: that they are supposed to be *visual*.
3. Pay attention to contrast. Light-colored text on a darker background is most effective. Using a light background not only is more difficult for audiences to see, but it also takes focus away from the speaker; the speaker should always be the focal point. Remember: visual aids are not the most important component of a speaking situation. The speaker is, and always should be.
4. Do *not* impose minimum nor maximum numbers of “slides” or visual aids to the students. The students should, if taught properly, be able to figure how many visual aids they need based upon the content and argument of the presentation. Imposing numbers of slides is *backwards* in terms of teaching students how to present orally. The number of slides has no bearing on how effective a presentation is if the speaker correctly applied the principles of when, how, and why to use visual aids.

**Tip #5:**

Teach students how and when to show (and hide) visual aids.

1. Visual aids should be shown to the audience *only* when they are being used as evidence for that particular claim in the presentation. Visual aids should not be displayed throughout an entire speech. This causes the audience to look at the projected screen the entire time. The audience should be looking at the speaker most of the time.
2. Students can put a blank, black slide in between other slides. No one will look at a black screen. (The “shutter” button on most projectors works well, too, but the blank, black slide will always work no matter how the technology is set up).
3. Speakers need to establish a connection with the audience to demonstrate that they are knowledgeable and trustworthy. Sustained eye contact with the audience is critical to effective speaking. Thus:
   1. Using presentation software throughout an entire presentation will make this virtually impossible. See the other guidelines for using visual aids.
   2. A speaker should never turn his/her back or side to the audience. The speaker therefore must know what slide he/she is showing and what it contains. The screen upon which a visual aid is projected is not the audience. Speakers should not speak *to* their visual aids.

1. “Poster Session” displays at academic conferences and events like school science fairs are obvious exceptions to this, but keep in mind that those are designed for a “rotating audience.” That is, 2 people stop to look at it, then another 3, and so on. This is a different situation than what “oral communication” means throughout this document. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)