



Developing Effective Presentations

Presentations are integral to business and are meant to inform, educate or persuade an audience. Memorable and effective presentations are made up of a dynamic speaker, a timely topic and supporting visuals that communicate well.

Some experts say that we acquire 85% of all of our knowledge visually. So, here are some tips and steps to follow when developing supporting visuals – the most common form being PowerPoint presentations.

1: Know your purpose

Preparation and organization is important for any writing task, and presentations are no different. It can be helpful to narrow your purpose to one statement. Answers to the following questions will help you determine your purpose and structure your presentation:

- Why am I making this presentation? What do I hope to achieve?
- What are the key messages I want my audience to remember? Is there any action I want my audience to take? You may want to narrow it down to 3-5 key messages for maximum impact.
- What do I know about my audience? What knowledge do they have of the topic? What reaction can I expect (positive, neutral or negative)? How can I meet their information needs?
- How can I relate my messages to stories? Analogies, examples, metaphors and targeted statistics (an example of a targeted statistic would be: “every third person in this audience will be affected...”) are very powerful and provide something concrete that your audience will remember. It’s not always about *what* you say, but *how* you say it.
- How many people will be in attendance? This is helpful when developing your visuals, as the larger the venue, the simpler your graphics should be.
- Will my audience need a copy of my presentation? What additional information will they need?

Once you’ve answered these questions, draft an outline of your presentation, at which point you’ll be ready to start writing your presentation and speech. Keep referring to your main purpose statement when writing – it will help you stay focused.

2: Know how to communicate

Presenting to an audience who may be sipping coffee or daydreaming during your presentation can be a challenge. Here are some communication tips to ensure your message is heard and understood:

- A cardinal rule of effective presentations is *tell them what you’re going to tell them... tell them... and finally, remind them of what you just told them* – that’s where dividing your presentation into sections (introduction, body and conclusion) comes into play.
- Use slides that act as division pages, transition, or summary slides (with a different layout from the main text slides); they help increase understanding and attention.
- Use a maximum of 20-30 words per slide (this will account for 3-5 minutes of speaking time). For larger venues, consider less words and simpler graphics.
- Convert text to bullet points, use short phrases, minimal punctuation, and bold or italic for emphasis, remove extraneous words that clutter your visuals.
- Consider providing your audience with a copy of your presentation.

- Make your presentation and additional information available on the Web.

3: Know basics of design

While words are important, design can be critical to effectively communicating your messages. Slides that are cluttered or hard to read will only frustrate your audience. With today's technology, you don't need to have a design background to develop effective visuals. Here are some tips you'll want to remember:

- Choosing the right colours is more about contrast than anything else. Consider a dark background with white text for dark or dimmed rooms, and a light background with dark text for bright rooms.
- Set up your template with a palette of approximately five colours and use them consistently throughout your presentation (i.e., headings always white, boxes always blue).
- Slide headings should fit on one or two lines in a minimum 32pt type. Bulleted text should be set to a minimum of 24pt type.
- Use minimal graphics and highlight only important points in complex graphics.
- If you must include complex graphics, tables or charts, incorporate that information in to a handout instead.

While your presentation has a specific purpose, the main purpose of the visuals is to support the speaker. In other words, visuals can never make up for a poor speaker, but should instead complement the speaker and topic. Knowing what your purpose is, how to communicate it well and using basic design principles will help you develop effective supporting visuals. Good luck!

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Next month:

Planning – It can be labour intensive, but planning is critical to knowing if you've achieved the desired results. Planning keeps projects on track – from a time and money perspective – and is a great starting point for that next big project.