

The Ten Commandments for Presentation Visuals

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Abstract

Too often visuals are hard to read, difficult to understand and detract from the presentation. This article describes ten commandments to remind agricultural educators of how to prepare and use visuals.

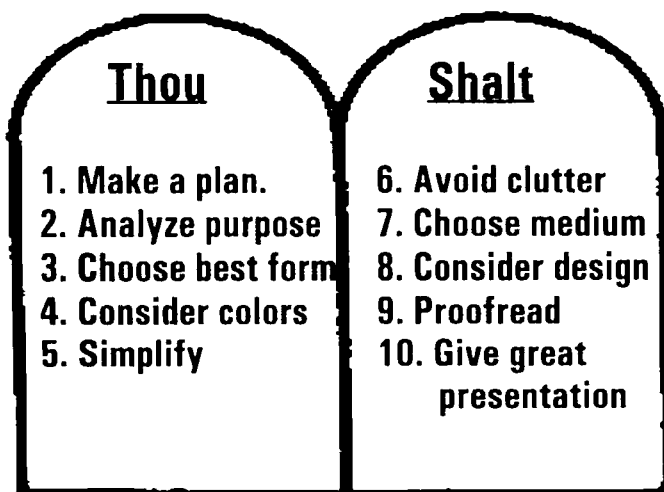
Introduction

Using great visuals and making great use of visuals in a presentation is like driving. We all know the rules, but often we disobey. We break the speed limit, run a stop sign or park in a no parking zone. Often visuals are cluttered, confusing, small print, visually assaulting and not used effectively. This article reminds everyone of some things they already know, but sets the rules of presentation visuals into ten easy-to-remember commandments summarized in Figure 1.

1. Thou shalt make a plan.

People remember 70% of information they hear and see compared to 20% of what they only hear and 30% of what

Figure 1



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they only see. With such communication power planning visual presentations becomes extremely important.

Computer hardware and software place powerful presentation tools in the hands of users. Some of the tools are those that in years past required the skills of several people. As is the case with any tool, the product produced by using the tool is no better than the skill of the user. Expensive, flashy tools do not ensure a high quality, valuable presentations. The most important process still occurs between our ears—thinking and planning.

Failing to plan is planning to fail or in this case, a boring, uninteresting, uninformative presentation. Planning is a thought process that requires effort. How to plan, or the methods of planning, are as diverse as people.

Even the person who scribbles a few notes on a sheet of paper before developing a presentation has an advantage over the person who launches into the development without any planning. Planning helps fuzzy ideas to crystallize, avoids false starts, prevents missed deadlines and saves time. Useful planning tools include: the outline, planning cards, topic spokes (web diagrams), flowcharts and storyboards.

2. Thou shalt analyze your purpose and your audience.

Any presenter's best friends are *who, what, why, when, where* and *how*. Accurately answering these questions about each aspect of a presentation ensures success. Some questions that help establish the objectives of a presentation are shown in the checklist in Figure 2.

Then, having established an objective and analyzed the communication problem, you must define your strategy, including the form for visuals, colors, simplification and the medium.

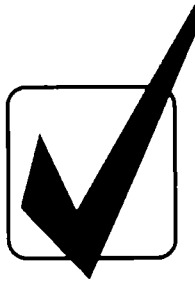
3. Thou shalt choose the best form for a visual.

Presentations communicate in five visual forms. The presenter determines which type of visual is best to convey the message to the audience. The five forms of visuals include—

- **A picture sequence.** This is a series of pictures telling a story.
- **Words on the screen.** This form provides visual impact, in either brief summary form or telegraphic lan-

Checklist

- Who is my audience?
- What do I hope to accomplish?
- Why am I doing this?
- When will I present?
- Where will I present?
- How much time and how many people?
- What are the conditions?



guage, to what the speaker is elaborating upon verbally. Text slides and overhead transparencies comprise 70% of most presentations.

- **Symbols.** Setting a mood by using an abstract or symbolic visual device to express an idea or fact.
- **Charts and diagrams.** The supporting graphic data or information needed to illustrate what is being said by the speaker.
- **Action sequence.** A short motion picture film clip or video clip inserted at the required place in what is otherwise a "still" presentation.

Table 1 lists some guidelines for choosing a visual form to convert data to a visual.

4. Thou shalt carefully consider your use of colors.

Used carefully, color enhances your message, provides richness and depth and puts a personal stamp on your work. The choice of wrong colors can produce a tacky unreadable presentation. Our world is filled with color so it is natural to want to portray concepts and ideas with color. When in doubt, presentations need to be developed with the old stand-by of black and white or blue and white. If the final presentation media is an overhead transparency produced

with a photocopier or laser printer, color is not generally available.

Table 2 provides some guidelines for selecting color.

When design students start out, they often spend as much as a semester working in monochrome. Colors are introduced, one or two at a time, only after mastering value, contrast, form and composition. Some professional graphic designers maintain that if a graphic does not work in black, white and gray, it cannot be salvaged with color no matter how many colors are applied. Researchers believe that improper use of color can work against learning. When legibility is critical, black on white is much more readable than most color combinations. Color may actually confuse rather than enlighten.

5. Thou shalt simplify your material for effective communication.

The presenter's job is to take complicated material and simplify it for effective communication in a visual presentation. Keeping words and graphics to a minimum on each slide or transparency helps do this. Six ways to simplify include—

- **With words**—Choose words carefully. Limit yourself to the points that are most important to the view. Eliminate extraneous content.
- **With numbers**—Since numbers are abstract, translating the values in graphic form helps get the point across. Do not be a slave to numbers. Use them only if they truly serve the purpose.
- **With other relational information**—Some relationships deal purely with links, hierarchies and comparisons. Flow charts and organization diagrams simplify the presentation of this type of material.
- **With artwork**—Often the most effective graphics are stylized and stripped of details. Flat bold images show

Table 1 Choosing the best visual form for presenting data

When the Data is	Use the Following
Quantities/trends. Relations of data over specific time periods.	Bar/column charts. All types.
Divisions. Parts of a whole.	Pie chart. 100 percent bar chart.
Quantities/trends. One item over another over extended time periods.	Line, surface charts or graphs.
Precise data.	Table charts.
Where things are. Distribution, demographics.	Map charts.
Organization. Items in a structure	Diagrams, charts & symbols.
How things work. Progress.	Diagrams, charts, picture sequences and action sequence.
Ideas.	Words, symbols, charts, diagrams.
How much. Volume.	Diagram charts.

Table 2 Guidelines for Using Color in Visual Presentations

Purpose	Use
Association	Identifies your presentation and remains the same throughout.
Differentiation	Distinguishes between like and unlike elements or classes of information.
Hierarchies	Light-to-dark or gray-to-bright sequences show progression of data or information.
Emphasis	Draws attention to elements in a graphic. Caution: Don't try to emphasize too much.
Audience appeal	Sets mood—serious, not serious, professional, dated, etc.
Readability	Choice set by what works for the audience and conditions.

relationships and convey information without introducing extraneous elements.

- **With photographs**—Photographs are the extreme of realistic artwork. Because they communicate directly with the audience and accurately represent a specific place and time some use is indicated. Photographs must clearly focus on the main element in the foreground.
- **With variety**—If you thoroughly understand the content of your presentation you can vary and choose the form that represents it best. Don't wear out one graphical treatment; at the same time don't add so much variety that it is distracting.

6. Thou shalt not create visual clutter .

A presentation certainly does not have to include pictures for every topic that deals with objects. Resist the temptation to use an obvious graphic for the sake of a graphic. Use a visual translation of the important concepts.

Four rules-of-thumb for the amount of material on one visual include:

- One slide or transparency, one idea
- Readable print at maximum distance participant may be from screen
- Five to six words per line
- Six lines per transparency or slide

Visuals should not be the presenter's lecture notes but an aid to the audience. If you have too much material to put in a visual, present it as a handout.

7. Thou shalt choose the proper medium.

Each medium—transparency, slide or electronic projection—has its own inherent qualities and properties. Designing with these characteristics in mind realizes the greatest

return on your effort. Although the elements are the same for all media, their applications are different. Transparencies and slides accompany and reinforce an oral presentation.

Another difference between media is orientation—horizontal or vertical. Slides definitely should be designed for horizontal presentation. The presenter should choose one orientation and stick to it throughout the show. Mixing horizontal and vertical formats presents problems with projection and destroys design continuity. Artwork must be proportioned to match the aspect ratio of the medium.

Here are some general suggestions for choosing the media—

Use overheads transparencies—

- When you want audience interaction in a lighted room
- For groups of no more than 35-40 people
- When other equipment is not available

Use 35mm slides—

- For any size audience, especially more than 50 people
- For a non-interactive lecture presentation
- For an interactive presentation

Use on-screen electronic computer presentations for—

- Small audiences depending on the projection unit size
- Up to 5 people when using a laptop with a standard 14-inch or 17-inch monitor
- 25-50 people when using an LCD panel or projector
- Up to 100 people when using a large-screen video projector and the room is not too large
- When you do not have time to produce slides or overheads
- When you want to interact with computer information using "what-ifs" or pre-programmed segments that can be accessed by buttons or keystrokes
- When you have pre-tested the system and are sure everything works as it should

8. Thou shalt consider the elements of design.

A design is simply a plan for reaching a desired goal or effect. Everyone is a designer in one way or another. Presentation layout is the application of design concepts—composing attractive, informative display visuals and sequencing the individual units to form an integrated whole.

Years of training and practice produce a graphic artist or designer. Presenters can still be aware of and use good design

practices, for example, use thumbnail sketches, grids, proper alignment, integration, devices and type.

Use thumbnail sketches to help visualize ideas. These are simple, small scale pencil drawings to set design ideas down quickly on paper.

Using grids establishes anchoring positions for text and artwork and they set safety zones so that no content is lost to the edges.

Selecting an alignment scheme dictates whether elements will line up along a left margin, right margin or on center. A grid provides start points. Alignment decisions are necessary within your frames and throughout your show. Consistent vertical alignment contributes to unity and continuity. The reader knows where to start reading. Flush-left alignment establishes a solid visual anchor for the reader. Flush left is easy to lay out and read making it an excellent choice for most presentation graphics. When type is justified, lines are flush on both sides. Justified type looks more mechanical and may not be as easy to read because of the inconsistent word spacing.

Use integration. Let the various components of each visual be given uniform graphic treatment. For example, most slides will have a title so that is a place to start. Other questions which integrate a presentation include—

- Are there subtitles in some of the frames?
- How about a college or project logo?
- If the images include illustrations, can they all have the same size and location on the frames?
- Can several small illustrations be grouped to fit in the same space as a large one?
- How does the main title frame relate to section titles in the rest of the presentation?
- Should they receive the same graphic treatment?
- Can all graphs be given the same placement within the frame?

Using similar layout treatments integrates your presentation.

Consider other graphic design devices. During the design and layout phases, you may find graphic devices helpful in separating elements or directing attention. Borders, boxes, lines, arrows and blank space are effective tools for these purposes. Use them only when needed, not merely for ornamentation.

Finally, the proper choice of type is fundamental to design. The more you learn about it, the easier it will be to

choose type wisely. Typography is another complete field of study. For now, choose a standard like Aerial, Times Roman or Universe. Do not keep switching type (fonts) in one presentation. No matter which type is used, do not use all capitals.

Use some design restraint. Graphic design simplicity is appreciated by most audiences. Remember, they decided to attend the presentation to reach a new understanding of your topic, not to be wowed by fancy pictures.

9. Thou shalt proofread your work.

Misspelled words and data that is incorrectly displayed detracts from your presentation. Use another person to proofread your visuals since it is difficult to catch your own errors. A peer review can save you some embarrassing moments in front of the crowd.

10. Thou shalt combine great visuals with a great presentation.

Do not let the visual stuff replace personal contact with the audience. Keep your eyes on the audience. Enjoy your presentation and let it show through in your enthusiasm and energy. Practice so you are comfortable in front of the audience. Do not become a statue or "talking head." Be a little animated. Finally, practice makes perfect.

Summary

Producing effective visual presentations requires planning, analysis of the purpose and the audience, effective use of the visual forms, effective use of color, simplification, design—and practice. Keeping all of these things in mind will produce presentations that will lead to learning and understanding.

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