

Using Visuals in Presentations

The following guidelines are aimed to help you produce meaningful, quality slides which will act as a visual accompaniment to reinforce the subject of your talk and help your audience understand your topic better. Although your slides are an intrinsic part of your presentation, your talk has to be structured orally, not visually, and the slides should in no way overshadow the content of your presentation. Prepare *what you want to say* first and once you are satisfied with the contents of your talk begin working on supporting slides.

Quantity

Your presentation lasts eight minutes and you should ideally develop three key points linked to the topic. The number of slides you need will depend on what you have to illustrate. In other words, the slides should contain information that supports what you are saying and should not be superfluous.

Words

If your slides include words, they should only contain *key* words that help the audience focus on the specific parts of your talk. The more words you use, the more likely the audience will be to *read* the slides rather than *listen to* what you are saying. It is advisable to use no more than three bullets per slide, or your slide will look messy and crowded. Use capital letters judiciously as when projected they can look aggressive, as if you are ‘shouting’ at the audience.

Fonts and letter size

The subject of your topic should be suitably serious for a university exam and therefore you should also choose a font that reflects this just as you would if you were writing an essay. Times New Roman, Bookman Old Style and Ariel are good choices, also because they project well with little distortion. The size of the letters is also important as you want to enable your audience to read the words clearly. You can differentiate between titles and subtitles or bullets by using a larger size (40-44) for titles and at least 32 for the latter.

Spelling

Remember to check the spelling of all the words that you use in your slides. You should also try not to hyphenate words as this can look awkward. If a word does not fit on a line, reduce the font size. Ensure that you have the proper English terminology or in the case of paintings etc. the English title.

Images

Some of your slides may contain no words at all – images such as photos or charts and graphs can be just as eloquent and easier to remember. They can create a very powerful message and will certainly add interest to your talk. However, just like words, the images you choose need to be appropriate and meaningful. The audience has to gain something from what they are observing and will not appreciate gratuitous slides. Quality here is important. There is a host of images available on the internet but you can also create your own. Do not use images that are out of focus as they will be even more distorted when projected and will make your presentation seem very careless. Avoid crowding too many images onto one slide as this is confusing for the audience. Your audience, however, will have certain expectations: if there is a photo or portrait of a person it is helpful if it is accompanied by their name. The same is true for paintings (provide the title and the artist and, if appropriate, the gallery).

Colours

You can select colours for the words and background to your slides. This enables you to create a greater impact but choose and match colours carefully and prefer bolder colours over more subtle ones as they tend to look 'washed-out' when projected. Choose a consistent colour scheme for your background so as not to distract the audience with constant changes. If you have an image and want to colour the background ensure that it doesn't detract from the picture. Also be careful with slides that have a patterned or shaded background as your message can sometimes fade into them so choose a colour that will make the words/image stand out more. Generally dark text on a light background works well but try to avoid white as it can be dazzling. Certain colours must be avoided. Red and green, for instance, clash and make reading very difficult. Colour-blind people are unable to distinguish words if you use this combination. Orange and blue is also not recommended as this combination creates a vibrating effect and the words appear to move. Lastly, red and blue is not advisable as too little contrast is provided.

Audio-visual clips

If appropriate, you can also include audio and video clips in your talk. Remember, however, that your talk only lasts eight minutes and so you can only dedicate a very short amount of time to audio or video in order to illustrate a point. Only include high-quality meaningful clips because otherwise, like poor images, they will lower the calibre of your presentation.

Special effects

Many special effects are available when creating a presentation. Once again, do not seek to astound by having words spiral onto the screen or images rotate. The audience will only be distracted from what you have to say. In other words, keep transitions simple and maintain the same transition throughout.

Opening slide

Many speakers project a blank slide before starting their presentation. The audience's attention is drawn to it precisely because nothing is there. This gives them the necessary time to settle and quieten as you prepare to begin. Once you have the audience's attention you can start your talk and project your second slide with the title and your name at the bottom. Sometimes titles can be complex and the audience might not have time to grasp the topic if they only hear it. If they can read it, then they can focus much more quickly on your chosen subject. Having your name in print is also a courtesy to the audience and the examiners.

Closing slide

Once again depending on the subject of your talk, you may want to use the last slide as a means of providing the audience with further information on the subject. A list of references is appropriate here as it will be both helpful to your audience and also show that you are genuinely interested in your topic and have gone to lengths to research it. The information must, however, be formatted according to APA guidelines and not merely a list of links.