



Creating Effective Presentation Visuals

Connecting People With Your Message

"iPhone," "Apple," "MacBook Air," and "Keynote" are trademarks of Apple Inc. (see www.apple.com). "Microsoft" and "PowerPoint" are trademarks of Microsoft Corporation (see www.microsoft.com). We have no association or connection with these organizations.

Apple® founder Steve Jobs was known widely for his great presentations.

His **unveiling of the iPhone®** in 2007 is considered to have been one of his best presentations ever, and, if you were one of the millions who watched it online, you'll know why.

The presentation was engaging, and passionate.

Jobs was particularly well known for building his presentations around powerful visual aids. He knew that slides are most effective when they tell a story rather than convey information, so his visuals were simple, elegant, and image-based. They complemented and reinforced his message, and they never competed with him for his audience's attention.

You don't have to be Steve Jobs to give a great presentation, but you do need great visuals. They convey a powerful message about your ideas and your brand, so it's essential to get them right. In this article, we'll look at how you can create effective presentation visuals – slides that connect your audience with your message.



Image-based presentation visuals make an instant impression on your audience.
© iStockphoto/visuals

Why Simplicity Speaks Volumes

The saying "A picture is worth a thousand words" is popular for a good reason: the human brain processes information more effectively when it is accompanied by images, or by short, memorable statements. This means that when you use simple, image-based slides to support your message, your audience can better grasp the information you're communicating.

However, many people use too many slides, or they build presentations around visual aids that are word-heavy or excessively complex.

These kinds of visual aids can negatively affect your presentation. Let's look at some examples:

- You're trying to convince the board to support a new product idea. Your slides are made up of graphs, numbers, and blocks of text from top to bottom, and board members spend most of their time reading the slides instead of listening to you. The result? You don't make a real connection, and your passion for the project is lost on them. They vote unanimously not to take the idea forward.
- You're pitching to a promising potential client. You spent a lot of time creating your slides, using many colors, animations, and fonts. However, the slides are so complex that your client has trouble understanding them. She leaves the presentation feeling overwhelmed and tired, and avoids using your firm because she fears, subconsciously, that dealing with your firm in the future could be similarly draining.
- You're giving a presentation to your department to highlight its good work. You want to feature everyone, so you make a slide detailing each person's accomplishments. Your department has dozens of people, so by the end, your team cares more about leaving than their results.

Now think about what happens when you use simple and engaging visuals. Instead of generating confusion or exhaustion, your slides create a positive connection with your audience. People might not remember exactly what you said, but they will remember a powerful image. They'll recall the positive emotions that they experienced during your presentation, and they'll start to associate your brand with clear, intelligent communication.

The results will be profound. You'll win new clients, convince colleagues to act on your ideas, and earn recognition for your team members' hard work. In short, you'll make positive impressions that will remain in people's minds long after the details of your presentation have faded.

Creating Great Visuals

Your visual aids have one job: To support your **presentation**. However, it takes considerable time, creativity, and effort to develop slides that do this well. Use the tips below to make the most of your preparation time.

1. Be Consistent

A common mistake is choosing different colors and fonts for each slide. This can confuse your audience and divert attention away from your message. Stay consistent with your slides, so that they form part of a seamless whole.

First, choose colors carefully, as color will affect your presentation's mood and tone. Also think about the space that you'll be presenting in. If the room will be dark (with lights off), choose a darker background color, such as dark blue, black, or gray, with white or light-colored text. If the room will be light (with lights on or plenty of ambient light), choose a white or light-colored background, with black or dark-colored text.

You also need to match color with the tone and message of your presentation. Bright colors convey energy and excitement, while darker colors may seem more conservative and serious. Align the color palette you choose with your subject matter.

Tip:

Microsoft® PowerPoint and Apple's Keynote are the most widely used presentation packages. They feature useful templates and tools, and most people are familiar with the layout of their presentations.

However, cloud-based presentation tools have features and templates that might be new to your audience, increasing the potential impact of your presentations.

2. Consider Culture

Before you create your visuals, make sure that you understand your audience. This is especially true if you're presenting to a culturally diverse group.

For example, not everyone reads from left to right, and people from some cultures may consider a particular color offensive or bad luck in business settings (look out for examples of this in our **Managing Around the World** articles). Additionally, **jargon** or slang may cause confusion with your audience.

When designing your visuals, use images and photographs that reflect the culture to which you're speaking. If you're presenting to a culturally diverse group, use pictures and images that reflect this diversity.

And keep graphics and phrases simple; remember, not everyone in the room will be a native English speaker. Whenever possible, use images to replace bullet points and sentences.

Tip:

Our article on **Cross-Cultural Communication** has more tips for communicating with an ethnically diverse group.

3. Use Images Intelligently

When Steve Jobs **unveiled the MacBook Air®**, he needed to show just how small this new laptop was. The audience wasn't going to remember that it was 0.68 x 11.8 x 7.56 inches; those numbers don't create an emotional response. Instead, he showed them that the MacBook Air would fit easily into a standard manila envelope. This was a powerful way to show its size.

This kind of creativity is essential when choosing images. Your audience has probably seen plenty of bad clip-art and too many pictures of cross-cultural handshakes. **Brainstorm** creative, clever approaches with your imagery, and look for photographs or illustrations that tell a story in a less obvious way.

Thoughtful images will keep your audience engaged, reinforce your professionalism, and make a lasting impression.

4. Break Complex Data Down

When you have to communicate complex data or large chunks of information, avoid putting it all on one slide, as your audience may struggle to take in all of the details. Instead, either summarize the information, or split it up over several slides.

You can also use handouts to communicate complex information. Handouts allow your audience to look at data closely. This is especially important when you're presenting to analytical people, such as engineers, scientists, or finance professionals. They are trained to be skeptical about data, and a handout will give them a closer look. Once again, this kind of attention to the needs of your audience will highlight your professionalism and support your message.

5. Keep It Simple

Each slide should focus on one idea or concept. This allows your audience to grasp quickly what you want to communicate. Keep your text to a bare minimum (10 words or fewer if possible), and, where you can, use an image to convey a message rather than words: For example, consider using a graph instead of a list to show changing trends. Each slide should take three seconds or fewer to process. If it takes longer, the slide is probably too complex.

Tip:

It can sometimes be helpful to follow a clear structure when creating your presentation; for example, if it is focused on a document or process with which audience members are familiar. This will help them make connections between your content and their existing knowledge.

Avoid bulleted lists whenever possible; they make it too easy to put several ideas on one slide, which can be overwhelming for your audience. If you do need to use bullets, don't use sentences; instead, simply list the fact, statistic, or idea you want to communicate. Then use your narrative to educate the audience about what these mean.

Example

Poor example: This slide contains too many words. Your audience will spend more time reading than listening to you.	Good example: This slide has just the key ideas.
New Product Features <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Product needs bright, popping colors. • We'll add additional safety features on the bottom. • It will now come in three sizes. • New design will be highly flexible. • Purchase will come with live HelpDesk access. 	New Product Features <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Colors. • Safety. • Sizes. • Flexibility. • Help.

To simplify the wording on your slides further, highlight the key word in every sentence.

Next, look at the layout of your slides. Aim to use a plain background and plenty of blank space: This will help to focus audience members' eyes on your message. Avoid decorating slides with background pictures, logos or patterns that could distract attention.

Last, consider using blank slides when you need the audience's complete focus; a blank slide is equivalent to a pause, and it will add drama, tension, and focus to your words.

6. Prepare

Many people underestimate how much time they need to set aside to prepare for a presentation. They'll spend days creating content and visuals but only a few hours practicing. Allow extra preparation time to hone your message and feel fully confident in your presentation.

First, take our interactive quiz, [How Good Are Your Presentation Skills?](#) , to get an idea of how well you speak. Our articles on [Delivering Great Presentations](#) and [Better Public Speaking](#) contain tips and strategies that will help you communicate with clarity and intention.

When you practice your presentation, use your visuals. You should be able to glance at each slide and know exactly what you want to say.

Tip:

If you're not confident creating your own slides, think about outsourcing the task to a professional. This can be a smart option when a lot is at stake, or when you don't have the technical skills to create the type of presentation you want.

Consider using an outsourcing service such as [Elance](#), [Guru](#), or [PeoplePerHour](#) to find a suitable professional.

If you do, keep in mind that **managing a freelancer** requires a different approach from managing a regular staff member. Be clear about the project details, communicate your goals for the presentation, and set deadlines that give you plenty of time to revise and add as necessary.

Key Points

Presentations that are too complex or lengthy can undermine your message. To create better visuals, do the following:

1. Stay consistent.
2. Consider culture.
3. Use images intelligently.
4. Break down complex data.
5. Keep it simple.
6. Prepare.

If the stakes are high with your presentation and you don't feel confident with your technical skills, consider outsourcing slide preparation.

This site teaches you the skills you need for a happy and successful career; and this is just one of many tools and resources that you'll find **here at Mind Tools**. Click **here** for more, subscribe to our **free newsletter**, or **become a member** for just \$1.

© Mind Tools Ltd, 1996-2014. All rights reserved. Click [here](#) for permissions information. "Mind Tools" is a registered