The Rhetoric of Decks

Sequential Visual Persuasion

in the Age of Artificial Intelligence

The Question

Why do some presentations **persuade**

while others are immediately forgotten?

This is not a question about slides.

It is a question about **human cognition**, **attention**, and **persuasion**.

Part I

What Is Rhetoric?

Rhetoric Is Not Ornament

Common Misconception

Rhetoric as:

- Manipulation
- Empty flourish
- Style over substance
- "Spin"

What Rhetoric Actually Is

The systematic study of **how humans persuade one another**

When communication succeeds, *why*?
When it fails, *why*?

The same argument, presented differently, is **not the same argument**.

Aristotle's Framework

Three modes of persuasion—still definitive after 2,400 years

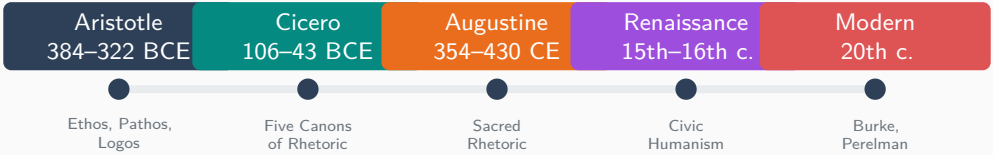
ETHOS
Credibility
Why trust this speaker?

PATHOS
Emotion
Why should I care?

LOGOS
Argument
Does this make sense?

*Effective persuasion requires **all three**—calibrated to context*

A Continuous Tradition

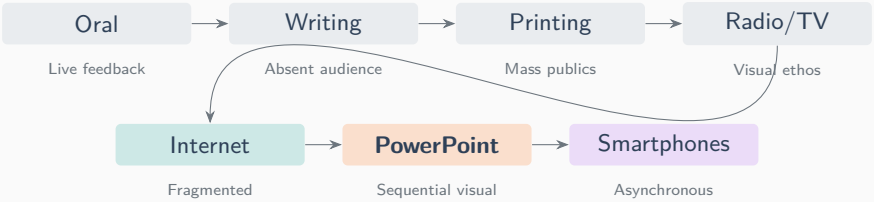


The core questions persist: How does communication persuade?

Part II

Technology Changes the Medium,
Not the Principles

Each Era Transforms the Rhetorical Situation



And Then PowerPoint

1987—A new medium, rarely theorized

Slide decks became **ubiquitous**:

- Business
- Education
- Government
- Military

They structure how organizations **think**, **decide**, and **communicate**.

Hundreds of millions of presentations daily.

Yet the theorization of this medium has been thin.

Tufte critiques.
But what makes a deck *work*?

Part III

What Is a Deck?

Definition

A slide deck is a form of

sequential visual rhetoric

designed to accompany spoken argument.

Sequential

Ordered. Slide 1 precedes Slide 2. Inherently *narrative*.

Visual

Composition, not text. The channel matters.

Rhetoric

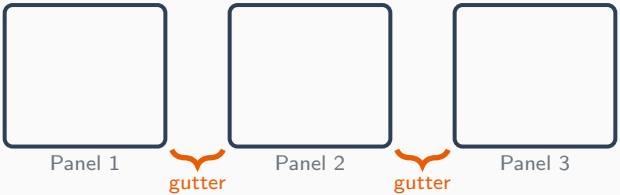
Aims to persuade. Ethos, pathos, logos apply.

Accompaniment

Not a document. Serves the speaker.

The Analogy to Comics

Scott McCloud's insight about sequential art



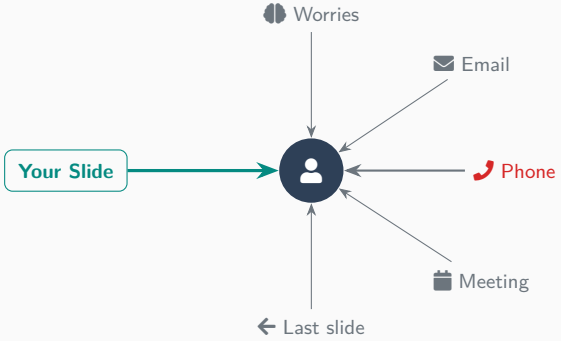
Meaning emerges not just from what's *in* each panel,
but from what happens **between** them.

Decks work similarly: transitions, juxtaposition, progressive revelation.

Part IV

Why Beauty Matters

The Economics of Attention



Attention is not **given**. It is **won**—slide by slide, moment by moment.

The Netflix Phenomenology

Theater vs. streaming—and what it means for presentations

Theater

- Captive audience
- Social norms enforce attention
- Phone use conspicuous
- Invested (paid, traveled)

Kurosawa, Leone, Scorsese could trust sustained attention.

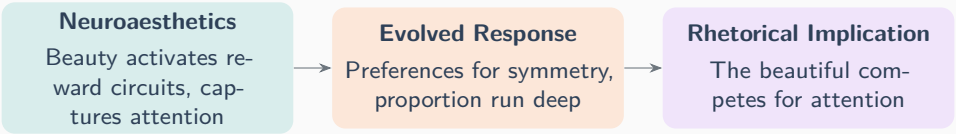
Streaming (and Presentations)

- Contestable attention
- Distractions everywhere
- Pausing effortless
- Minds wander

Netflix advised: *regularly remind viewers of the plot*.

A presentation faces conditions closer to streaming than theater.

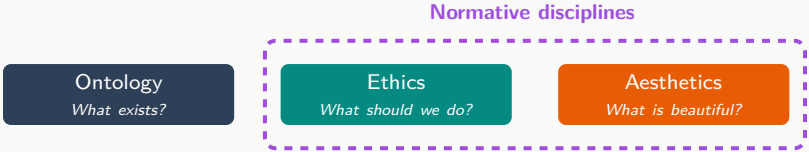
Why Beauty Draws



A beautiful slide says, without saying:

This is worth looking at.

Aesthetics as Ethics



The presenter who takes the audience's time **owes them something**:

Not merely information, but information *rendered well*.

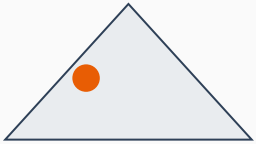
To present ugly slides is a form of disrespect.

Beauty is function.

Care for the audience,
respect for the material.

Defamiliarization

Viktor Shklovsky, 1917: Making the stones feel like stones



A man walking up a mountain without shoes develops **callouses**.

At the summit, he cannot feel his feet—**but he also cannot feel the rocks**.

The protective adaptation that prevents pain also prevents sensation.

Art exists to restore sensation. The effective deck must make the stones feel like stones again.

How to Defamiliarize

Techniques

The unexpected visual
Figure where bullets expected.

Provocative framing
Not "Sales up 15%" but "A 737's worth of revenue weekly."

Violation of expectation
Devil's Advocate slide. Conclusion before evidence.

The Goal

Break the trance of habitual reception.

Pull the audience out of their phones.

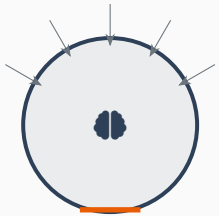
Demand **genuine cognitive engagement**.

The audience has seen hundreds of presentations. They're calloused.

Part V

First Principles

The Law of Cognitive Load



Limited Working Memory

Every element consumes cognitive resources.

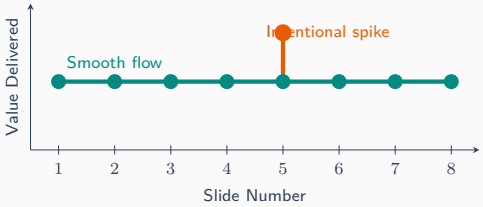
When resources are exhausted, **comprehension fails**.

A slide with 3 bullet points $\times$ 12 words each may produce *less* understanding than one clear point.

One idea per slide. One.

The Marginal Principle

Smoothness as default, surprise as intention



Smoothness

Equal marginal benefit per unit of attention. The audience develops a rhythm.

Surprise

Break the rhythm when it matters. The core finding. The devastating question.

The Slide Serves the Spoken Word

If slide understood without speaker
$\Rightarrow$ **It's a document**

If speaker must read slide aloud
$\Rightarrow$ **Double failure**

Complementary: Speaker elaborates, slide anchors

Slides should be **incomplete** when read alone.

They provoke the question "what does this mean?" that the speaker then answers.

Reminding Them of the Plot

Bad ways vs. good ways

Bad Reminders

"As we discussed, our analysis began with the recognition that market conditions have shifted, which led us to examine three potential strategic responses, the first of which..."

- Verbose recap
- Identical repetition
- "In case anyone wasn't paying attention..."
- Agenda slide ad nauseam

Good Reminders

- **Structural markers**

  Brief visual cues showing location in argument

- **Backward link in forward claim**

  "This 15% gain we identified earlier compounds when..."

- **Visual callbacks**

  Earlier figure, now with new annotation

- **Titles that orient**

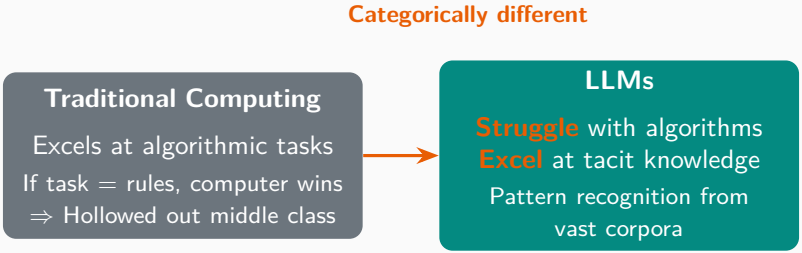
  "Robustness Check 3" not just "Analysis"

Part VI

Large Language Models
and Tacit Knowledge

The Jagged Frontier

David Autor's insight about AI and labor



The Polanyi Paradox: We know more than we can say.

LLMs extract knowledge humans possess but **cannot articulate**.

What LLMs Have Seen

Trained on materials including:

- Countless slide decks
- Presentation outlines
- Books on communication
- Research on cognition

But also seemingly unrelated:

- Mad Magazine's visual satire
- Sports Illustrated's data narrative
- Stereo manuals' technical clarity
- TV Guide's compression

Each artifact contains tacit knowledge

About visual rhetoric, information hierarchy, audience attention

LLMs develop sensitivities to what works—across more examples than any human encounters.

Part VII

Case Study:
The Academic Job Market Talk

The Stakes

75 minutes

Sophisticated, critical audience
Senior scholars who have heard hundreds of these

Substantially determines career trajectory

This context demands the **full apparatus**
of deck rhetoric.

The First Slide: Establishing the Plot

Bad vs. Good

Bad First Slide

Motivation

- Prior literature has examined X
- There is debate about Y
- This paper contributes to Z

Generic. Bloodless.
Could describe any paper.

Good First Slide

47%

of firms report zero R&D

Yet they generate 23%

of all process innovations

What's going on?

Creates a puzzle. Audience curious.
Plot established.

The Methodology Slide: Ethos Through Transparency

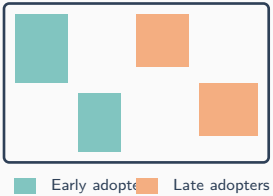
Bad: Hides Behind Jargon

Identification Strategy

- Exploit exogenous variation in policy timing
- Instrument satisfies relevance and exclusion
- Standard errors clustered appropriately

Asserts without demonstrating.

Good: Shows the Work

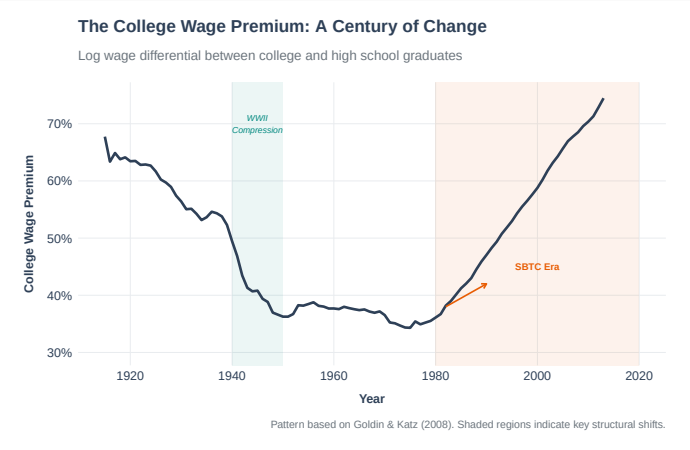


Policy rolled out state-by-state, 2003-2011.
We compare early vs. late, before vs. after.

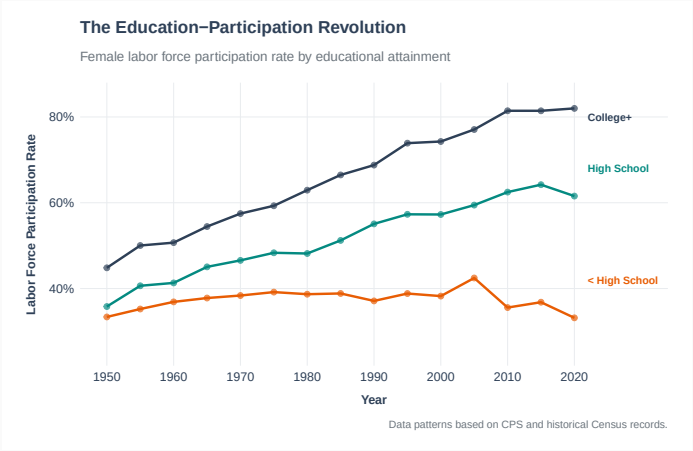
Audience can **see** the variation.

Example: The College Wage Premium

A century of skill-biased technological change

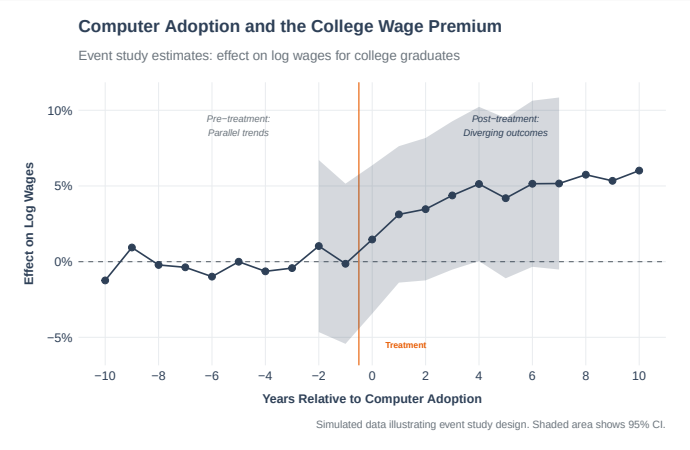


Example: Gender and Education in Labor Force Participation

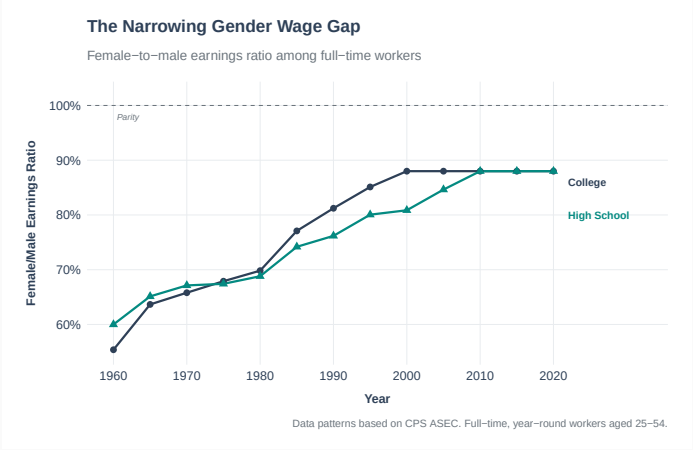


Example: Event Study Design

Making identification visible

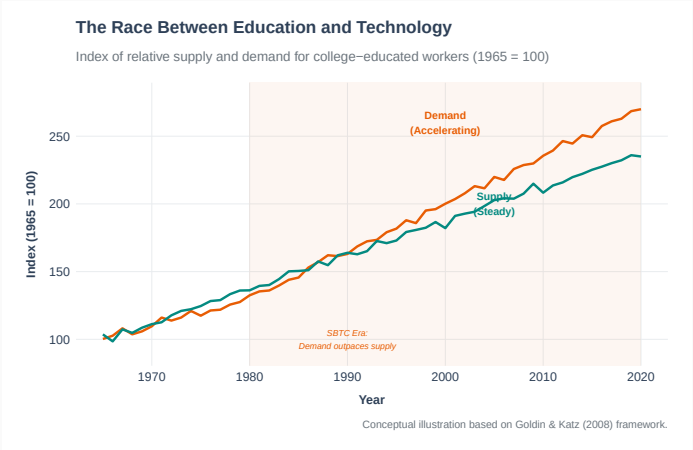


Example: The Gender Wage Gap Over Time



Example: The Race Between Education and Technology

Goldin & Katz framework



The Results Slide: Numbers That Speak

Presenting regression results effectively

Bad: Dense Paper Table

Tiny font, many columns, asterisks everywhere.
Eyes glaze.

	(1)	(2)	(3)
College	0.48***	0.45***	0.42***
	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.02)
Female	-0.22***	-0.21***	-0.19***
	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.02)
College × Female		0.07**	0.06*
		(0.03)	(0.03)
Experience			0.04***
... 15 more rows ...			

Good: Key Number Prominent

+48%

College wage premium

(s.e. $= 0.023$, $p < 0.001$)

Controls: experience, gender, urban, year FE

$N = 847,293$

The number that matters is unmistakable.

Full Regression Table (When Needed)

Returns to Education: Log Wage Regression

Variable	Coefficient	Std. Err.
College Degree	**0.482*** **	(0.023)
Female	-0.215***	(0.018)
College $\times$ Female	**0.067** **	(0.031)
Experience	0.038***	(0.003)
Experience^2/100	-0.065***	(0.008)
Urban	0.124***	(0.015)
Constant	1.847***	(0.042)
$R^2 = 0.312$, $N = 847{,}293$, *** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$		

Key finding: College premium is 48%, but **larger for women** (+6.7pp).

Figure Design: Labels and Self-Sufficiency

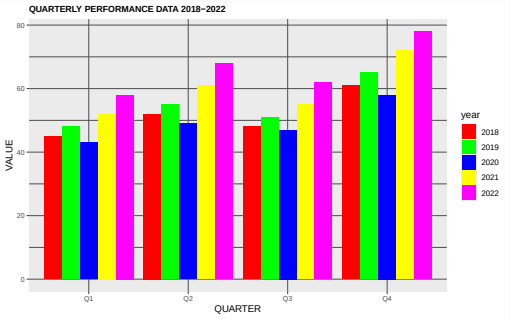
Every figure should have:

- **Title states the finding**
  "Policy X Increased Innovation" not "Figure 3"
- **Axis labels readable from back**
  Larger than you think
- **Direct labeling**
  Label lines, not legends
- **Annotations on graphic**
  "Treatment begins here"
- **Source and notes**
  Small text for later readers
- **Self-interpreting**
  Grasp the point immediately

This is more work than defaults. It is work worth doing.

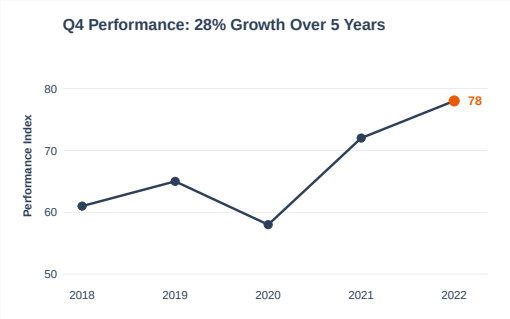
Visualization: Bad vs. Good

Cluttered, Unfocused



Default colors, no focus, legend requires eye movement, what's the point?

Clear, Focused



One story, direct label, title states finding, eye knows where to go

Tufte's Critique—and Beyond

Tufte Is Right About

- Bullet points fragment ideas
- Chartjunk obscures data
- Default templates encourage low-resolution thinking
- Bad decks proliferate

But His Critique Proves Too Much

- If medium inherently corrupts, effective decks impossible
- **They're not.**
- Problem is misuse, not medium
- He evaluates as document, not performance

Tufte's positive vision—high-resolution data displays—provides a template for what slide figures should **aspire to**. Read him as a **demanding teacher**, not an enemy.

Conclusion

Toward a Mature Theory

What We've Established

- Rhetoric applies: ethos, pathos, logos
- Beauty is function, not decoration
- Cognitive load is the enemy
- The slide serves the spoken word
- Defamiliarize to earn attention
- Remind the plot gracefully

These principles persist. Their application varies with context.

The Contribution of LLMs

What large language models contribute is perhaps not new principles but **newly available articulation**.

Breadth

More examples than any human encounters

Pattern Recognition

Sensitivities to what works across contexts

Articulation

Making explicit what practitioners know implicitly

The tacit knowledge embedded in effective communication, now surface-able.

Decks are how a large portion of human knowledge and decision-making now flows.

They deserve the serious analysis that earlier media have received.

They deserve, at last, a rhetoric.