AIM FOR THE RECTANGLE OUTSIDE THE BOX

By Dave Underwood

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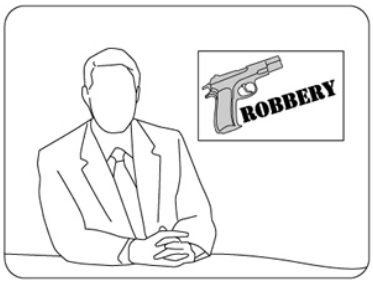
My first job after leaving art school back in the eighties was with the art department at a local television station, where I shared an office with three other designers. We produced a huge array of work, from airbrushed portraits of the on-air talent to "personal checks" the size of beach towels for use as props for the station's various public donations.

One of our routine tasks has stuck with me, and I think of it often when working with students. Our art department made thousands of "super-cards" — rough, quickly rendered graphics, mounted on 11x14-inch illustration boards, captured on video, and superimposed above the news anchor's left shoulder — to highlight whatever story was being read during the evening's broadcast. Big pileup in Larimer County? Our super-card might show a dented fender or a highway patrolman in profile. A rash of holdups on the city's North Side? We might knock out something as predictable as a pistol or a bag of cash.



The super-card obviously predated the arrival of digital graphics in broadcast television. In spite of its primitive form, though, the card's use was sophisticated and is worth revisiting when discussing delivery of any presentation to a live audience. Critically, we heeded two cardinal rules in broadcast: Don't Compete with the Talking Heads and Don't Confuse the Audience.

Respecting the Talent

How different, really, is a TV anchor delivering the day's news from a business major giving an in-class presentation? I'd say, not very. Both are physically present to connect with and engage the audience. When we watch a well-delivered newscast, there's simply no question of who controls the story. A strong presentation is no different. A student showing her work should command the audience's total attention. Poorly designed, cryptic, or unnecessarily dense or busy slides will make this difficult. That's where the super-card strategy comes in: Our job is to concisely illustrate the content without upstaging the talent.

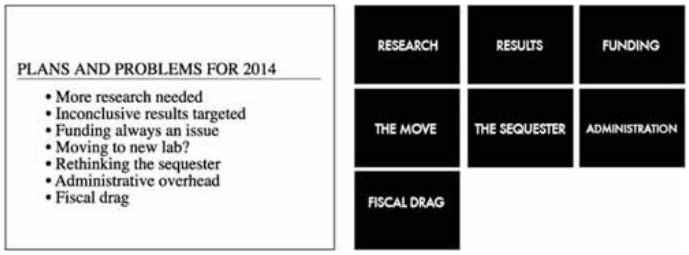
The goal of visuals used in presentations should be to anchor or summarize that which doesn't easily or efficiently flow through spoken narrative. Unless slides are evidentiary in nature, serving as artifacts for review and reflection, they should stay well clear of the presenter's relationship with the audience… like super-cards.

This is tough to get across to students. Too many of their presentations leave me asking myself, what's the point? That's because students often think of PowerPoint (or other presentation tools) as nothing more than a way to create a projected and brightly colored mirror of their "script," and thus come to rely on PowerPoint's features for all the wrong

reasons. During critiques I explain the thinking behind super-cards and beg students not to simply read their presentations aloud to their classmates.

Speaking in Tongues

Have you attended a talk in which you saw long, bulleted lists that said things like "More research needed" or "Inconclusive results targeted"? To me, these fragments of thoughts are much like an unfinished super-card. There's enough information to be confusing and, by extension, distracting, but not enough to digest and move on. This happens, I'm certain, because the presenter was "thinking in PowerPoint" when composing the slides.



You may have heard rules about upper limits on the number of slides you should have in your stack. Forget them. In the figure above, breaking the list on the left into seven separate, easy-to-grasp slides will keep your talk moving and, better still, will allow your audience to fully concentrate on the most important person in the room — you.

An audience switching attention between the speaker and dense, nonsensical, or stubborn slides is a problem. As the presenter moves on to the next topic, many attendees are still trying to understand the topic just covered or trying to find their place in a 20-line list. This needless competition between the author and his or her own work can — and should — be avoided.

Why Johnny Can't Present

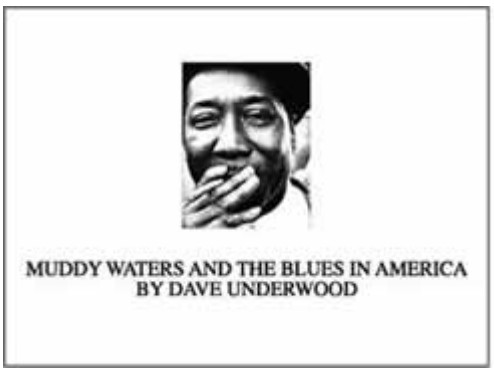
Every semester I help dozens of students storyboard their presentations. I try to get them to see their work through the eyes of their audience and to challenge themselves by making "naive" assumptions about what it is they *think* they're saying. That's a surprisingly difficult thing to do, but I marvel that anyone would give a major presentation without trying this first.

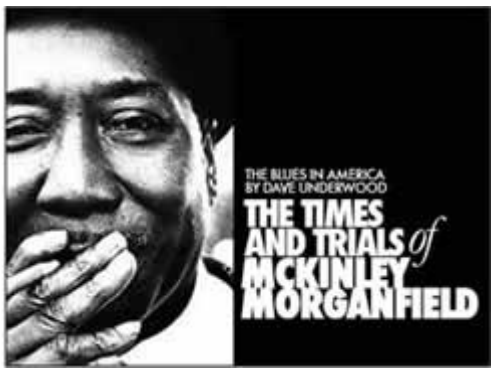
PowerPoint is a rectangle. That's it. I wish, when helping a student, that I could scrub away the prevailing presentation orthodoxies in which they've been schooled and get them back to seeing that basic, lovely rectangle as nothing more than a place to communicate. We don't have to speak in bullets. We don't need clip art — or any art, for that matter — for each slide in a presentation. We can use as many slides as we want. We can even delight.

Working a Tough Room

I tell students that if they come to a presentation unprepared, with ugly or sloppily conceived slides, they enter the situation in deficit. They'll have to work hard just to get back to baseline, no matter how stellar their scholarship has been. It might seem a little unfair, but the world is

becoming an increasingly sophisticated place, and presenting oneself well and professionally is a fundamental part of any presentation.





Average no longer cuts it. And that's why, if I'm helping a student prepare a pitch for a business class, for instance, I send her *anywhere* other than to a PowerPoint help page for guidance and inspiration. I'll have her Google images of annual reports, propaganda posters, even calendars and magazine layouts, as places to find great design with a clear message. I want more than anything for her to break the PowerPoint spell and dress her hard work in the zippy clothing it deserves.

And when she takes the podium and the crowd settles down, I want her to lean forward, smile, and *own* that room.