

## On Using Slides:

# Some Principles for Good Presentations

Even if we don't get the opportunity to serve you as a customer, maybe we can serve you for free.

Many surveys have shown that the greatest fear of people throughout the world is getting up in front of an audience and speaking. We like to turn that into fun. We've had years of experience in front of crowds both big and small, and we're not good speakers -- without good graphics, anyway. But armed with the right graphics, an ordinary speaker with extraordinary ideas can teach or persuade, sell or enlighten the United States Congress without so much as a sweaty palm.

Chances are, your ideas are important to you. The following is a list of practical guidelines you can use to design the graphics you need to get those ideas across so people will remember them.

Communication, especially with presentation materials, is an art. There are no rules. But there's a lot to generating a good image. Very often, what looks great on a computer screen just doesn't show up the same way when it's projected. Try to remember a single guideline: the object is to communicate --not merely to create something beautiful. How do you discern the difference? It depends on which half of your brain you use, the kind of material you're presenting, and who's sitting in the audience.

**Are Slides Really What You Need?** Slides work best for formal presentations to large groups, usually in darkened rooms. They're not the best tools in the world if what you need to do is conduct a small-group workshop (with lots of eye-to-eye contact). They don't work well in question-and-answer sessions, when you may need to back up to an idea that you've already discussed. For that kind of presentation, especially on very short notice, overheads and flip-charts are probably better tools. But if slides are what you need, then the following material should help you.

*Try using dark backgrounds.* Plain old black beats anything, especially if you end up speaking in a room where you should have trouble controlling the lighting in the room. Light backgrounds look wonderful on a color monitor, but in a dark room a light background will wash out almost anything you place on top of it. Dark-colored backgrounds -- blues, purples, greens work pretty well, though not as well as black. You sacrifice some contrast with any color you use in a background; the more color you use, the more contrast you give up. And the greater the contrast, the greater the impact.

The flip-side of that is, *Lots of people use (boring) black or blue backgrounds.* Most of the people in your audience have grown up with television; you'll need to compete for their attention to the other things in their lives. The most important thing you need to remember is to keep the background dark and the foreground light. That gives you plenty of range in the colors you can use for your text. And speaking of text:

*Use brightly colored text, in light colors.* Pastels -- yellows, pinks, light blues and light greens work best. There's a hierarchy of color, too; use lighter colors to accentuate your major points. White "out-powers" 'em all; then yellow, then beige, then orange, then red. Reds and blues always look great on a computer, but they're no good for text unless it's boldly outlined in white.

Should you stick to the same color(s) of text throughout a presentation? Nah. That's corporate boardroom stuff. Unless you're presenting to left-brained people (attorneys, accountants, professors of anatomy and the like), be sensitive about monotony. Vary your colors occasionally, so your audience never quite knows what to expect.

*Avoid the funny fonts.* Some are absolutely beautiful to look at, but they don't communicate because they're hard to read. Stick to simple typefaces that you're likely to find in a newspaper or magazine; they've been chosen as a result of lots of expensive research aimed at finding out what people are likely to read. Examples are Helvetica (Arial, Swiss), Optima, Bodoni and Times Roman. Save the fancy stuff for special effects; it'll have a greater impact that way.

*Use large text.* You should be able to hold a slide between your thumb and forefinger at arm's length and read it easily -- except for a possible footnote or doo-dad. More importantly, if you have any difficulty at all reading something on your monitor, your audience will not be able to read it. Hint: stick to caps & lower cases except for major titles or headings. And stay away from compressed text (squeezed horizontally); it's almost always hard to read.

*Minimize your text!* Try to avoid using more than 12-20 words in a single image, unless you're using a "build" -- a bullet list that gets repeated in a sequence, adding progressively more lines with each slide. (And don't use more than one or two of those per hour; people have a tendency to tune them out.) Try to use larger numbers of simpler slides, projecting them faster. It costs the same as fewer complex slides, but it enables you to keep your presentation moving along.

*How about lines?* You can use lines in contrasting colors to help organize the layout of a slide. But remember that what shows up on your monitor may be too thin to project well. Preview it carefully in zoom mode, to see what it'll look like in comparison to text; in standard magnification, most software conserves memory by displaying lines in a "generic" thickness. A good thickness for outlining bold text is .007-.010 inch; .030 inch usually makes a good underline. To be sure, preview your lines by printing them on a laser printer and viewing them at a distance of about 20 feet. If a line really shows up well on paper, it'll probably work for you when it's projected.

What color should you use for your lines? Although it's a terrible color for text, red makes an excellent choice for lines. But remember, you'll need a thicker line in red or blue than you will in a lighter color, for it to project well. Likewise, watch out for light-colored lines that are too thick or that don't contrast with other objects, like text. They can have the effect of giving a washed-out appearance. On the other hand, a white line makes a good separator between two colors of text, if the colors aren't too bright.

Put special thought into the design of your *main title slides*. A good title slide attracts an audience's attention, and tells them about not only the content of a presentation, but also how the speaker is going to approach it. A title slide also portends the quality of a presentation; for instance, a sloppy one communicates the fact that the presenter threw h/her material together and

didn't give it much advance thought or planning. That almost always is perceived as an insult. But a classy title slide, with a different colored background, a frame or a piece of clip art placed just right, can tell an audience that their speaker regards them with respect.

In general, good speakers like to display a good title slide for about 5 minutes prior to the scheduled beginning of a presentation, so this kind of communication can take place. If participants have a number of presentations to choose from, it has an added tendency to attract people into the room who haven't yet decided which one they want to attend.

*Lighting is important!* There's nothing more frustrating for a speaker than to spend hours and money developing a killer slide series and try to present it in an undarkened room. On the other hand, people don't attend a presentation to see slides; they want to be able to see and hear the speaker. Try to have the screen area darkened, but the rest of the room (or podium area, if you're a podium person) light enough so you can make and maintain eye contact with your participants.

*Don't simply read your slides.* Audiences appreciate good graphics -- always. But even the best graphics won't cover up your lack of command of a subject. Know your material backwards and forwards, and try to remember where a few key slides will come during your presentation. It can really enhance the impact of a point if you know just when to present that special slide.

*Constantly evaluate your effect.* Watch your audiences. Ideally, nobody should fall asleep and nobody should leave during your presentations. Nothing's ideal, but that's what you should shoot for. If you find people aren't paying attention to you, consider the possibility that you're moving too slowly, that you aren't using enough color, that people can't read your slides, or that you aren't using them properly. Also consider the other factors -- room too cool, room too warm, speaking right after lunch, etc.

***In Conclusion,*** we hope we've offered you some sound guidelines for planning your presentations. Mind you, they're not rules; what makes you special is your own style -- your voice, your mannerisms, your inflections. But generally, they'll help you to communicate those valuable ideas of yours, the way they've helped a lot of others.

Good Presenting!

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