

The Visual Slide Revolution

Transforming Overloaded Text Slides into Persuasive Presentations

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Introduction

Presentations, especially those using computer-generated visuals, have become the standard communication tool for businesses and government today. But most presentations that are designed and delivered aren't nearly as effective as they could be. They're usually a series of overloaded text slides read word-for-word by the presenter. Presenters who want to be successful have to join the visual slide revolution to stand head and shoulders above the normal, boring, text-filled presentations.

Organizations train their people on presentation skills and send them on technical courses to learn all the features of the software used to create visuals, but neither activity addresses the core problem. What's missing is training on how to use visuals effectively to persuade an audience of decision-makers to act on your message.

Most presentations to decision-makers are carried out by specialists or analysts. This is a plum opportunity for the staff person to gain visibility at a high level in the organization. But what happens? Almost every time, the specialist ends up spewing endless reams of data at the audience, usually in slides filled with text and numbers. The result is that decision-makers are more confused than before. Decisions get delayed or made on incomplete or incorrect assumptions.

Why does this happen? Analysts and specialists focus on the detailed data in their work because that's their job. They may be responsible for analyzing market data, operational data, financial data, competitor data, economic data or other data that's relevant to their business. They're immersed in it every day. When given the opportunity to present it to decision-makers, they mistakenly believe the audience wants to see all the data they deal with every day. They specialist feel that since the data is so important, the audience will surely not want to miss any of it.

Unfortunately, that viewpoint is wrong. What many specialists and analysts fail to recognize is that there's a difference between data and information. Data is raw numbers that reflect reality in a market or business. The job of the specialist is to take the data, analyze it and create conclusions that the non-experts can easily understand.

The specialist must adjust his or her mindset. The audience doesn't need to be fed all the raw background data that went into an analysis. Instead, the decision-maker wants to answer the critical question: what conclusion do I need to know that will affect my decisions?

Once specialists adopt this viewpoint, their focus will change and their presentations will improve dramatically.

Presentation Visuals

We can look at creating a message that gets acted upon as a two-step process. First, we need to determine the right points to focus on and the proper order in which to deliver them. Once we know what points we want to make, the next step is to create effective ways of making those points stick in the minds of audience members.

Why use visuals instead of text? Because research has demonstrated overwhelmingly that visuals are more effective.

One survey in 2007 asked respondents what annoyed them about poor PowerPoint presentations they were seeing. The top three annoyances were:

- Speaker read the slide to the audience - 67.4% of respondents cited this
- Full sentences instead of bullet points - 45.4%
- Text so small it couldn't be read - 45.0%

The clear conclusion is that by using primarily text slides you have a high likelihood of annoying your audience instead of informing them. Audiences will be patient for a few moments, but if you've lost them in a sea of text, you may never regain their goodwill or attention. Text-only slides that contain a transcript of what the speaker is saying are to be avoided at all costs.

Research by [Prof. Richard E. Mayer](#), author of *Multimedia Learning*, found:

- Audience members understand better when words and corresponding pictures are both used rather than words alone.
- Audiences understand better when words are spoken rather than displayed as text for them to read.

Mayer's research strongly suggests we should design presentation slides that we can speak to, instead of read. That echoes the results from the "annoying presentations" survey. Ideally, these slides should contain pictures and other types of visual representations of our information.

More research comes from [Prof. Allan Paivio](#). His dual-coding theory of cognition states that information is processed in two distinct channels in the human brain: one deals with visual information and one handles verbal information. The brain codes each type of information differently and we comprehend best when the visual and verbal information are consistent with each other. If there are multiple or conflicting inputs in a single channel, there will be difficulty in interpreting different inputs.

Applying Paivio's theory to business presentations, we recognize that a well-designed, clear visual that's explained verbally will result in the best understanding by the audience. Confusing visuals or reading text that's displayed will cause overload in one of the channels and lead to poorer results for presentations.

The Visual Slide

A number of commentators have suggested that the solution to overloaded text slides is to create only slides that contain no text. But this advice is shortsighted. There are two ends of the spectrum - all text or no text - and choosing either of those extremes is not the best option. A balance is more effective. There's a role for both text and visuals on slides.

In joining the visual slide revolution, we need to define a visual slide carefully. A visual slide is not the absence of text it's the presence of a visual that encourages a conversation with the audience.

The first part of the definition makes the point that it isn't about a lack of words on the slide. It's more than that. The second part refers to the visual on the slide, which could be a picture, graph, diagram, illustration, media clip or other visual. It doesn't relate to a specific type of visual, but merely that one is present on the slide, usually along with some text.

The last part of the definition is the key. The visual you're using encourages the audience to think, consider your point and engage in a conversation with you, the presenter. A good presentation isn't a one-way communication. It occurs when the audience and presenter are engaged in a discussion of the ideas that are being presented. Involvement increases the level of caring that the audience has with the ideas.

The KWICK Method

Initially, making the move from text-overloaded slides to persuasive visuals may seem daunting. The anticipated difficulties and fears can be overcome through the five simple steps of the KWICK method:

- Key Point
- Words that Suggest the Visual
- In Context
- Crystal Clear
- Keep Focus

The first step is to get really clear about what the Key Point of the slide should be. Each slide should make one point and one point only. This first step articulates the key point for each slide. If you aren't clear on the point of the slide, any visual you may create will be confusing.

Analyze the data or other inputs and decide what the strongest point will be for this slide. It may be that your data leads to two or three important points. If so, you must create two or three slides, with one point for each.

State your point as a sentence. The sentence doesn't have to be expressed in perfect grammar, but it should clearly state the conclusion you want the audience to draw from the slide. It should become the headline of your slide.

Now that you know the key point, you should determine what visual to use. How do you know what visual to create? You look at the *Words that Suggest the Visual* . Once you've written the headline for your slide, look at the words and phrases you used to summarize the key point. They will give you a clue as to what type of visual will work best for this slide.

If you're writing about a flow or process, use a diagram. If you talk of market share, a pie chart is suggested. If you talk about a trend, consider a graph. Survey results are most commonly shown in a reverse horizontal staircase bar graph with the longest bar at the top. If something is happening over time, a GANTT chart or timeline diagram should be considered, or if the results are numeric, a column, line or mountain graph.

Pay attention to the words, and the best visuals will come to mind. Get additional clues by listening to how you describe the point to others.

Once the type of visual has been selected, the next step is to create the visual. The most important part of that step is to make certain that the visual is *In Context* for the audience. The audience must be able to relate to the visual to become engaged with the message.

When creating visuals for your slides, represent your ideas in such a way that the audience will be able to understand your point. Too often, visuals are created without context and that leads to confusion or even the wrong conclusion being drawn from the visual.

Sometimes context is provided by comparing an idea to something the audience is familiar with. Sometimes it can be created by using a format the audience is used to seeing, and sometimes you have to associate your visual through an analogy.

For example, when using numeric information, the usual temptation is to copy a huge table of numbers and drop it onto a slide. Big mistake. If you do need to show a table of numbers, keep it to a reasonable size and highlight the important numbers. But also consider displaying the information as a pie chart, line or mountain chart, bar chart or the like.

After the visual has been created, your next step is to make sure the point is *Crystal Clear* . Message clarity is paramount to a successful presentation - the point of the visual must be easily understood. Methods for improving clarity include:

- The proper use of well-designed callouts containing both graphics and text to direct the audience's attention to the most important part of the visual.
- The use of photos embedded in graphs or diagrams to enliven the point further.
- The use of shading in some pictures or graphics to emphasize certain areas - by having surrounding areas fade out to the background.

Once the slides have been created, it's showtime! All your hard work will be wasted unless you *Keep the Focus* of the audience where you want it to be. As you're presenting, the audience can get easily confused. The visual must be presented in a logical manner that keeps their attention on the conclusion you want them to draw from each slide.

With a complex visual, for example, you may break it down. Start with the entire slide, then move on to a zoomed-in part that shows the first point you want to discuss. Then return to the main visual to show briefly where you've just been and where you're heading with the next zoomed-in slide. Alternate between zoomed-in slides and the overall visual until each part has been explained. End with the overall visual to tie all the pieces together.

Conclusion

Put aside boring old text slides and join the visual slide revolution. Use the KWICK method to build presentations that stick with decision-makers, helping them get to the core of issues.

- End -

About the author: [Dave Paradi](#) teaches professionals and executives how to develop persuasive visuals.

Related Reading

Any of these books can be ordered directly from Amazon ([A](#)), Barnes & Noble ([B](#)) or Chapters ([C](#)) or may be summarized in our execuBook library ([E](#)).

Why Most PowerPoint Presentations Suck: And How You Can Make Them Better, by Rick Altman, Harvest Books, 2007, ISBN 9780615142234. [A](#) [B](#) [C](#)

Presenting to Win: The Art of Telling Your Story, by Jerry Weissman, Prentice Hall, 2006, ISBN 9780131875104. [A](#) [B](#) [C](#)

Presentation Zen: Simple Ideas on Presentation Design and Delivery, by Garr Reynolds, New Riders Press, 2008, ISBN 9780321525659. [A](#) [B](#) [C](#)