Visual Aids: Complement, not Nucleus

by Jean Wilcox Hibben, PhD, MA, CG[SM]

How many times have you attended a presentation (genealogy-related or not) and found yourself looking at the projection screen, trying to read infinitesimal-sized print? If you have been to even just a handful of programs, you still probably cannot count the number of times you have been in that position. Why do speakers attempt to explain their points by showing a document or form that is too small for anyone in the audience, even in the front row, to read? Most likely because they have forgotten the cardinal rule of visual aids: to enhance the program, not to be the center of attention.

After teaching public speaking in the college classroom for over a decade (plus another decade in the private sector), I still find this to be one of the most violated tenets of the discipline, so I thought that this would be the most ideal forum to share some ideas on how to avoid this infraction. In the "old days" (pre-PowerPoint), we instructed folks to use visuals only at the times they would be needed, keeping them out of sight when not referenced (lest they become a distraction and prevent people from hearing the verbal message).[1] Visual aids were considered an addition to a speech, and, unless the presentation was a demonstration, should be kept to a minimum.[2] In fact, I never allowed my public speaking students to use visual (or audio) aids until half-way through the term, wanting them, instead, to start to feel comfortable in front of an audience before having to deal with handling objects, transparencies, posters, or electronic media.

Those who teach public speaking frequently remind their students to ask themselves certain questions before employing a visual aid:

1) Is it relevant to the topic?
2) Does it make the information more understandable to the audience?
3) Will it cause (potential) problems for the speaker to display or handle?

Answers to these questions will determine whether or not to use (or alter) the speech enhancement.[3] But, beyond those fundamental questions, a fourth must also be included: Is the visual aid large enough to be seen, even by those in the back of the room or hall?[4] While some counter that last element by simply passing the object (document, form, etc.) around the room, this is unadvisable. When an item is going from person to person, those viewing it are not focusing on the speaker. The end result is that the audience member will likely lose track of what the speaker is saying and the points, then, are lost. This, of course, is similar to the problem we have when a handout is provided in advance: audience members read ahead and miss crucial points.[5]

So what is a speaker to do? Here are some helpful hints to assist you, the speaker, in deciding what to use (and how) and, more importantly, what not to use. Suggestions here are focused on the use of transparencies and, for those who either already use PowerPoint or are making the transition to it, the use of that medium as well.

Color. It has power. Studies have shown that presentations that employ color in the visual aids have more impact and are more likely to be "absorbed" by the audience members. Of course, certain colors are more effective than others (avoid combining red and green or colors that are too closely related, such as blue and purple). Used properly, color has the potential of increasing

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[1] Jo Sprague & Douglas Stuart. *The Speaker's Handbook, 5th ed.* Ft. Worth: Harcourt College Publishers, 2000, p. 366.
[2] Stephen E. Lucas. *The Art of Public Speaking, 7th ed.* Boston: McGraw Hill, 2001, p. 326.
[3] Andrew D. Wolvin, Roy M. Berko, & Darlyn R. Wolvin. *The Public Speaker/The Public Listener.* Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1993, p.116.
[4] Lucas, p. 327.
[5] Ibid., p. 331.

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comprehension over 70%![6] While black lettering on a clear (white) background (on transparentices) may reinforce your point, using red or dark blue may grab attention. Or underline important words or points with a red, water-based marker (this can be simply rinsed off so the transparency is clean for the next presentation).[7] For transparencies, it is recommended to keep the lettering dark and the background light; for PowerPoint, it is just the opposite: use a dark background with light-colored lettering.[8]

Size. If it cannot be seen, why use it? Sometimes we are tempted to show a census record or a birth certificate because the discovery of it is germane to our presentation, but if it cannot be read, it becomes a distraction, not an enhancement. A rule of thumb for transparencies is if it is too small to be read with the naked eye from 10 feet away, it is too small to project on a screen for the audience (figure the type should be "one inch high for every 30 feet of viewing distance").[9] It is a little more difficult to assess for a PowerPoint presentation, but here is an idea: display the document on the computer screen, in the viewing format, and step back 10 feet; can you read it? If not, the audience will have the same problem. I know: you *really* want to show the item. Try this: blow up just the section that is pertinent until it is large enough to be seen as just described. This is easier with PowerPoint than with transparencies, but can be done in either case. If the writing is hard to make out (unless that is your point), retype the information and copy onto another slide or put as an inset box on PowerPoint and show that so that people can see what you are referring to.

Out of sight, out of mind. Put visuals on display when they are needed and remove them when they are not. With transparencies, use the system of "revelation": use a piece paper to cover the information until you are discussing it, then reveal it by sliding the paper down or over to display the next point.[10] When you are no longer referencing a visual aid, it should be out of view. Remove the transparency when you are done discussing it; if you do not plan to use another one for a period of time, put a sheet of paper on the projector surface so the audience is not blinded by the white light (or turn the projector off if you will not be using it for a very long time).

You can use a similar method with PowerPoint by employing "custom animation" for each section of a given slide (this can be adjusted to fifth-level paragraphs by going to "effect options" and clicking on "text animation").[11] Often, people who are making the transition between overhead transparencies and LCD projection simply recopy their slide masters into the PowerPoint program without applying the animation. (Of course, animation setup must be done in advance of presenting the program to an audience so some forethought is necessary.) For those who neglect to employ the animation feature and who are new to using PowerPoint, the temptation to try to cover up material on a given slide finds them putting a piece of paper on the computer. It does not take long to realize that this method is unsuccessful! But, like overhead transparencies, PowerPoint slides also should be off if not applicable to a portion of the presentation. Most remote controls for these programs have a "black out" option, to reduce the screen to white or black until the speaker is ready for the next slide. Speakers should always check the equipment (especially if it is not their own) to

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[6] Andrew D. Wolvin, Roy M. Berko, & Darlyn R. Wolvin. *The Public Speaker/The Public Listener.* Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1993, p. 329.
[7] Steven R. Brydon & Michael D. Scott. *Between One and Many: The Art and Science of Public Speaking, 3rd ed.* Mountain View, CA: Mayfield Publishing Co., 2000, p. 305.
[8] Lucas, p. 330.
[9] Brydon & Scott, p. 304.
[10] Ibid., p. 305.
[11] Microsoft PowerPoint, 2003.

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understand how to use the various options (and to make sure everything is operating correctly).

LET THE AUDIENCE SEE! Regardless of your slide option, remember that it is important that the audience be able to see what you are showing. Avoid standing in front of the screen.[12] If you are using transparencies, especially if you are writing or pointing on the transparency, the projector should be to your right (if you are right-handed). After writing or pointing on the projector, step back so everyone can see what you have done. This also helps the speaker automatically slow down and allow the words and visuals to "sink in." Resist the temptation to point to the screen: use a pen or pencil and lay it on the transparency on the projector to point to items you are emphasizing.[13] There is also an option for doing this with PowerPoint so you do not turn your back on the audience in order to point to the screen, but this option requires some practice and is not always the better choice for calling attention to something. If I know I am going to emphasize a particular point, I use the underline or circle features of the program and then animate those elements with a "mouse click." (Again, this must be anticipated and programmed into the presentation in advance.)

SUPPORT, NOT FOCUS. The visuals you use are designed to support your points, illustrate your methods, enhance understanding, and assist retention of your information. You need to keep your eyes on your audience (even if everyone else is staring at the projection screen). Glancing at the screen is not a problem, but turning your back on the assembly to read your presentation from the screen will lose your audience. Use notes or, if using PowerPoint, your computer screen, to be your prompt; resist the temptation to use the projected image in this manner.[14] Again, it is strongly suggested that you become familiar with whatever equipment you will be using. If you are not using your own projector, etc., arrive early enough to practice with the machines. While we may not be able to prepare for any unexpected event (power failure, computer crash, etc.), being comfortable with the equipment will help you work smoothly with it and keep the audience from focusing on the problems.[15]

USE AIDS IN PRACTICE. When practicing your presentation, work with the visual aids, even if you do not have a projector. You can create a "mock" projector for transparencies, stand next to it and work with manipulating the slides as needed. With PowerPoint, go through the slides on the computer to see how the animation will work. Practice keeping your eyes from locking on the transparencies or computer screen. Remember that using visuals, regardless of the type, will take time and coordination; if your practice does not include the enhancements, your timing is almost certain to be off when in front of the presentation attendees. Practice with the visuals will aid you in not talking to the aids and will help increase your own confidence level.[16]

FINAL THOUGHTS. You are the entity the audience has come to hear and see, not the PowerPoint or transparency slides. Never let the visuals become the focal point of your presentation. Use your own enthusiasm and knowledge to communicate your message, being enhanced and supported by the visuals. When you become secondary to the aids, you have lost your audience. If you are in a situation where your operation of the equipment becomes a distraction (to you and/or the audience), enlist the assistance of someone to advance or project the slides.[17] And ask yourself, in advance, what will you do if the equipment fails and you are totally unable to use your planned visuals? Have a plan B; do not

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[12] Lucas, p. 331.
[13] Brydon & Scott, p. 305.
[14] Arthur Koch. *Speaking with a Purpose, 3rd ed.* Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1995, p. 40
[15] Wolvin, et al., p. 198.
[16] Sprague & Stuart, pp. 373-375.
[17] Ibid., p. 376.

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put all your faith in technology. Your brain is still the superior computer!

My son, a Dell Computer technician, has an article that he has posted in his cubicle entitled "Official: Powerpoint Bad for Brains." The primary points of the article involve a study that concluded that humans have difficulty absorbing information that is coming at them both visually and verbally. While this appears to contradict other research, mentioned earlier, it is referring to the phenomenon of the speaker repeating the exact words that are displayed on the screen. Overexposure to this method of disseminating information causes the receiver to suffer a sort of "information overload" and, as a result, "tune out." The researchers do point out that using examples, diagrams, and photographs do help the listeners absorb the information, but, unless putting up just a few key words, avoid putting your presentation text onto PowerPoint slides.[18]

So do a little spring cleaning of your visual supports for your presentations. Check over your slides, whether transparencies or PowerPoint, and rework or remove those that do not follow this mantra: Make it large, keep it visible, make sure it supports, and stay in charge! Do not allow your visuals to be what the audience remembers: you are what the program chair booked, not your speech enhancements (otherwise, you could just send them the PowerPoint and save the gas!).

[18] John Oates. "Official: Powerpoint Bad for Brains," *The Register* [on-line], April 4, 2007. Retrieved April 7, 2009, from *http://www.theregister.co.uk/2007/04/04/powerpoint_bad/*.

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