



Preparing and Using Visual Aids

There are many types of visual aids. If you are giving a demonstration or an illustrated talk, you must have at least one visual aid. (No visual aids are allowed for speeches.) Following are some of the commonly used visuals:

posters	charts
PowerPoint slides	models
pictures/photos	dry erase boards
overhead transparencies	articles made
equipment	animals
movie clips	audio clips

You will need to choose the visual aid that will work best for the purpose you have in mind. For additional information on choosing visuals, read the section “Select Your Visual Aids” in the handout “Steps in Planning a Presentation.”

It is important to know details of the location where you will be giving your presentation. Be sure you know what equipment/supplies they will have available and what you will need to bring yourself. The size of the room, the lighting options, the noise level, etc. may all have an impact on your selection of visual aids.

Whatever types of visual aids you choose, be sure you practice using them ahead of time. During your presentation, you should be able to use every visual smoothly and with confidence.

If you have a lot of visual aids, you might want to make a list of everything you need before hand. Then you can check each item off as you pack it to take with you.

A common error is using an educational display as a presentation visual aid. Educational displays are meant to stand on their own without verbal explanation. The writing and pictures are too small to be of use to an audience during a presentation.

Setting Up Your Visual Aids

Set up all your visual aids yourself unless you need help with large or heavy objects. If you have a lot of visual aids, sometimes in the interest of time you can have other people help you carry things in, but you should arrange them.

How you place your visual aids is important. Be sure the audience can see everything and that none of your visuals block the audience's view of you. Place taller items in the back and arrange items in the order you will use them. Having movement flow from the audience's left to right can help them follow along.

All of your visual aids should be within easy reach and convenient to use. Avoid clutter. Have only what you will actually need.

Plan the order of your presentation so that you don't have to turn lights on and off multiple times. It always takes some time for eyes to adjust to changes in lighting.

If you have any equipment, check to make sure it is working properly before you begin your talk. If you are borrowing equipment, know how to use it.

Using Your Visual Aids

Even when you are using a visual aid, it is important that you talk to the audience. Don't talk to your visual. Stand beside or behind your visual aid, never between it and the audience. Try to not spend too much time with one visual or the audience will lose interest.

As much as possible, have only what you are using in view or as the center of interest. Plan what to do with a visual when you are finished with it. Generally, you do not want to throw things on the floor or toss them in a heap on a table. Set them aside neatly. In some cases you may need a garbage bag to put items in (try taping it to the back of the table). If you have a title board with an outline of presentation, it can be helpful to the audience to have that in view the entire time.

If you have multiple posters, stack them in order on an easel. When you are finished with one, place it back on the easel behind the other posters instead of setting it on the floor or on a table. The audience will find this less distracting, your posters will stay clean, and the posters will remain in the proper order should you need to refer to them when answering questions.

If you must use noisy equipment during your talk (a blender, sander, etc.), don't talk while the equipment is running. You don't want to have to shout to make yourself heard. Explain what you are doing before and after, and try to not have the equipment running too long.

Do not pass things around while you are presenting. You want the audience to stay focused on you, not some object they are looking at. If there is something you would really like the audience to see up close, invite them to come up at the end.

Guidelines for Specific Visual Aids

Posters, Charts (and variations)

Posters may be the most commonly used visual aid as they are relatively inexpensive and easy to make. You can do them completely by hand or you can use a computer. The important thing is that you do them yourself. This should be a learning experience for you, not your parents or leader. Be sure you look them over carefully when you are done. You don't want any spelling errors, words left out, or photos mislabeled.

Make sure your poster has a purpose. Here are some times a poster is useful:

- Every demonstration or illustrated talk should have a title poster.
- An outline of your talk will help you remember what comes next and lessen your use of notecards. It will also help the audience follow along.
- All kinds of charts and graphs are easy to do as a poster.
- Bulleted lists (of main points, steps in a process, etc.) make good posters.
- Diagrams are useful as posters. These could be of buildings, rooms, farms, etc.

Each poster should have one main idea. It is better to use two or three posters than to try to cram too much information on to one. Keep posters simple, not "busy." Be sure to leave space around the edges so they don't look crowded. You might use the front and back of a poster so you don't have so many to carry around.

When making posters, be original and creative. Posters don't have to be just text written on paper. For variety, add photos or something with texture. Feltboards with velcro objects you can add or move around can be effective.

The design of a poster has a huge impact on its effectiveness. Whether you are making your posters by hand or using a computer, they can look professional if you follow these basic guidelines:

Size

Anything on your posters needs to be large enough for the audience to see. Text should be readable from the back of the room. This requires lettering 1½ to 2 inches high. Photos may need to be enlarged. Small artwork that is barely visible is not useful. Check your posters

yourself ahead of time. Stand where the audience would be and see if everything on your poster is readable or visible.

Text

Keep text short. Don't write entire sentences. Instead, list only points or concepts and then explain these with your words. Bullets often work well. Audiences are easily bored if you have too much writing and then just read off of your poster.

Writing can be done by hand, with stencils, or on a computer. If you write by hand, use light pencil marks to guide you so your lines are straight. The pencil marks can later be erased. If you use stencils, it is best to fill the letters in or they are hard to read. If you write your text on a computer, cut out the words or lines neatly and align them correctly on the poster.

Use a lettering style or font that is easy to read and that fits your topic. Ornate fonts are usually not very effective. Be sure you don't use too many different fonts on one poster. Generally, one or two different styles are all you need.

Capital letters are usually more difficult to read than lower case ones. Use capitals only when needed or for special emphasis. Boldface type, italics, and underlining can also be used for emphasis, but again, don't overuse them.

Color

The use of color is extremely important. Color can create a mood, it can match your topic, and it can help tie all of your presentation together. It can be used to highlight major points or to help organize your information.

Don't overuse color; two to three colors per poster generally works best. You will need to experiment until you find a combination of colors that works well for what you are attempting to present. It is best to choose one color of posterboard to use for all your posters. This creates a professional look and unites all your visual aids together.

Make sure the colors you select are readable. Use dark colors on light backgrounds and light colors on dark backgrounds. Good posterboard colors are white, green, blue and gray. Bright yellow, red or orange may be hard to look at for very long although they can be used for special effects. Try to use one dominant color and have a contrast between light and dark colors. Avoid using red and green together as this is difficult for color blind people to see.

Borders

Borders visually force your audience to focus on the text on the poster by acting as a barrier. This barrier stops the audience's eyes from wandering off the paper. Borders can be as simple as a straight black line drawn around the perimeter of the posterboard. They can be more elaborate as long as they do not distract from the content. Decorating the four corners can be an effective border.

Assembly

Create your posters on paper that is heavy enough that it will not bend or buckle. You don't want your poster to fall over in the middle of your talk. Foamboard is a little more expensive than posterboard, but it works well. If you put posterboard on top of foamboard, it strengthens the posterboard, and you can reuse the foamboard many times.

Backing or matting your photos and artwork will give a finished, professional look to your posters. Again, don't use too many colors and make sure everything is cut out neatly.

Arrange all the pieces on your poster in a pleasing design. Using the same design pattern on all of your posters will help the audience follow along. Generally, working from the top to the bottom and left to right works best.

Leave space separating various sections to make it easy for the audience to focus on the item you want. It's good to have about 1/3 of the poster blank. This is visually pleasing to the audience and won't cause eye strain.

Be sure you glue everything down securely. Loose edges look sloppy and decrease the life of your posters. It's a good idea to carry a glue stick with you for last minute repairs before you give your presentation.

Equipment

Select the best possible piece of equipment for the job you need to do. Be sure that your equipment is safe and that you demonstrate correct methods of using it. You must know how to use everything properly and practice ahead of time so there are no surprises.

Before you begin your presentation, make sure all equipment is in good working order. Everything should be neat and clean and safe. If you have jars, bottles, or cans, loosen the tops before you start so that you can open them easily while you are talking. To lessen noise, put down a cloth or paper towels you can set things on when you are finished with them.

If you have equipment that needs electricity, check ahead of time that outlets are available. It's a good idea to take extension cords and spare batteries or bulbs with you. Make sure cords are placed where you won't trip over them.

When using electrical equipment, there is always a chance it can fail. It's wise to have a backup plan just in case things go wrong.

Articles Made

With a demonstration of “how to do” something, having a finished product to show the audience is always advisable. You may also need to bring the article at various stages of completion. This is helpful if time does not permit you to completely demonstrate each step. These samples can also prove useful if you run into problems while demonstrating.

Foods

If you are working with food in your presentation, it is critical that you follow proper procedures for health and safety, especially if you will offer samples to the audience. Keep hot things hot and cold things cold. This may require you to have a heated dish or ice. Perishable ingredients could be brought and kept in an ice chest. Tie up long hair and wear an apron and close-toed shoes.

Your hands, all materials you use, and your work surface must be kept clean. While setting up your presentation, clean the work surface with kitchen antibacterial wipes. Laying out wax paper to mix and measure over will make clean up easy. Have towels or sponges handy to wipe up spills, and tape a sack to the table for garbage. Place a tray or bin nearby to collect utensils that have been used.

Put a towel or mat under bowls and pans to lessen the noise. If there is no mirror over the table, be sure to tip containers so that the audience can see what you have. When needed, demonstrate proper measuring, mixing, or other techniques.

If the product cannot be made from start to finish during the time allowed for the presentation, bring samples that are done at various stages and be sure to thoroughly explain the in-between steps to the audience.

During your demonstration, it is nice to have the recipe on a poster for the audience to see. You might provide your audience with copies of the recipe at the end of your presentation. This will allow them to enjoy watching you prepare your food without having to write down all of the ingredients and instructions.

If you are going to offer samples to your audience, bring all items needed to serve the food to the audience. In a contest, only food made during the presentation can be served to the audience. The judge must have observed each preparation step in insure that proper food safety and handling practices were followed.

Live Animals

Before you choose to use a live animal in your presentation, ask yourself if it is really needed. Don't just have it there to "look cute." Animals are not completely dependable, and your nervousness can make them nervous. They can present a safety concern (especially large animals and dogs) and they can be distracting to the audience.

On the other hand, an animal can add great interest to a presentation. Sometimes having an actual animal present is the best way to get the audience to understand what you are attempting to teach.

Be sure to notify contest officials if you will be using a live animal. Special arrangements may be needed to accommodate large animals. Keep animals a safe distance from the audience. Be aware that you may not be allowed to use live animals in all contests.

If you decide to use a live animal, know that you are responsible for your animal the entire time it is on site. Practice safety at all times. Make sure the entire audience can see what you are doing, but do not let strangers handle your animal. If possible, take the animal to the presentation area ahead of time to let it get used to the place. Practice with your animal around people until it is comfortable. Anticipate problems that might arise (barking, urinating, etc.) and be ready to handle them.

Whenever possible, hold your animal or its lead yourself. Your animal will be more comfortable around you, and you will be better able to control it should it decide to act up. If you must use another person as a handler, instruct them not to talk or draw attention to themselves during the presentation, and make sure they, too, are dressed appropriately. You do not need to introduce them or thank them during your presentation. In fact, this detracts from your presentation by breaking the flow of your talk. Thank them privately after the presentation is over.

Bring out your animal only when you are ready to work with it. If you need to use other visual aids to teach, do these first. Once an animal becomes part of a presentation, what the speaker says is dwarfed by what the animal does. Present the majority of your information while you have your audience's attention.

If you are placing an animal on a table, provide a carpet sample or towel for it to stand on. You must also keep your hands on the animal at all times to make sure it doesn't fall off the table and injure itself. At the end of your presentation, you should use an anti-bacterial wipe to clean the table.

Models

Models can be useful when you want to show something that is too large to bring in or that is too small to be seen. They can also be used to replace live animals.

Models should be well-constructed, neat, and accurate. They need to be large enough to be seen by the entire audience.

Handouts

Handouts should be distributed only when you are done with your presentation. Otherwise they are too distracting. People will be looking at the handout instead of listening to you.

Handouts are not necessary, but they can be useful. If you have prepared a food dish, giving out the recipe is a nice touch. If you've given a demonstration on how to make an item, the audience might enjoy a list of the steps involved. And if you have a lot of references, a list of these could be helpful.

If you decide to distribute a handout, be sure they are neatly made and accurate. Bring enough for everyone.

Overhead Transparencies

Overhead transparencies are good for bulleted lists or steps of a process that you want to reveal one line at a time. They also work well for overlays or when you want to write or draw as you talk. When making overheads, follow many of the design guidelines of a poster (size, text, color).

Be sure you know how to use the projector before you begin your talk. In particular, know how to place the transparency so that it is not backwards or upside down, and know how to focus the machine. It's also a good idea to know how to change the bulb. During your talk is not the time to figure these things out.

Two drawbacks to using transparencies are that you usually have to have the lights off and the projector can be noisy. People need to be able to see you during your presentation, so you don't want the lights off for your entire talk. And you don't want to have to shout over the noise of the projector.

Audio or Visual Clips

When used properly, an audio clip or bit of video can greatly enhance a presentation. Remember, however, that these need to be short. The main focus is on you, and you need to be the one doing the majority of the talking and demonstrating.

Before you begin your presentation, have the tape, DVD, record, etc. set at the correct spot. The audience doesn't want to hear or see extra material, and you don't want to lose their focus as you fumble to get the right bit to play.

The biggest problem with using video clips is getting the equipment there to view them. TV's are heavy and awkward to transport. Computers may not work, especially if you are trying to use your flashdrive with someone else's computer.

Any audio or visual clips you use during your presentation must be controlled by you. You cannot have any one else handle them.

PowerPoint Presentations

PowerPoint is a presentation computer program that is widely used in schools and businesses. It consists of a series of "slides," which are individual pages that you design. Just as with posters, it is important that you do the preparation work yourself. Also like posters, the design of the slides has a big impact on their effectiveness.

In general, keep your slides simple. Don't overload them with too much writing or too many pictures. Leave margins around all the edges, and leave an extra-wide margin at the bottom of the slide. This is the area the audience is the least likely to be able to see.

Use a pale, cool tone rather than white for the background. Remember that colors appear lighter when projected, and white is hard on the eyes. A consistent background can help bring unity to your presentation. Sometimes you may want to change backgrounds with different sections of your talk. Be sure you don't use a background that distracts from the information on the slide.

Putting too much text on a slide is the most common mistake. Use only key words and phrases. Do not write out full sentences and then read them. The audience should be listening to you and looking at you, not just reading your slides. The only time you should write out full text is if you have a slide of a quotation. As much as possible, use slides of pictures or charts instead of text.

Lettering on the slides needs to be large enough to be read from the back of the room. Depending on the font, this usually means 28-34 in size. It also helps to make the lettering bold. Don't use too many fonts on one slide and make sure the font can be easily read.

Use color for emphasis, but don't use too many colors on one slide. Contrast is good. Use light on a darker background or dark on a light background.

PowerPoint has all sorts of special-effect features for moving blocks of information on and off of the slides. Do not over-use these. Too many transition effects can be not only distracting but annoying as well. Also, don't switch slides too quickly. Each slide should be projected for a minimum of 30 seconds.

When you have prepared all your slides, be sure you proof them. You don't want any errors in spelling or labeling in the final product.

PowerPoint can be used to great effect when giving a presentation, but you must be aware of its limitations. Any time you are using a computer program to present, it's best if you have your own equipment. Too often, the format or device you use to save your slides won't work on another machine. If you have to use someone else's equipment, you should always have a back up plan in case it doesn't work. Have a set of transparencies or posters with you just in case.

Another drawback is that a PowerPoint presentation can sometimes overpower you as the speaker. Especially in a contest, you need to be the focal point since you are the one being evaluated. Try to leave the room lights on so the audience can see you. Use a remote so you don't have to just stand by the projector but can move around and interact with the audience. A laser pointer can be helpful to point out specific items on a slide. Most important, don't over-use the PowerPoint. You are the critical part of a presentation, not the computer program.

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