Designing visual aids for your presentation

Learn how to design engaging visual aids and presentations.

# Introduction

Once you’ve planned the content of your presentation, it’s time to get started designing your slides.

In this post, you will learn about a number of different tools you can use to create your visual aids, what to consider when selecting what to display on your slides, and some key design tips to help you to design slides that won’t send your audience to sleep.

Deciding what to use

Microsoft PowerPoint is most people’s go-to tool when creating a presentation, but it’s not the only option. In this section, we will look at some of the key tools available, and examine some of their strengths and weaknesses.

# **PowerPoint**

PowerPoint and other slide-based presentation tools have developed a bad name for themselves, but can be extremely effective if used well.

* **Good for:** Quickly generating a good-looking set of slides and image-based presentations.
* **Bad for:**Non-linear presentations.
* **Watch out for:**Built-in templates, Smart Art or anything else you’ve seen in dozens of other presentations, they can cause accessibility issues than text alone.
* **Tips:**Think of it as a blank canvas.

# **Prezi**

Prezi is an online presentation tool which uses a zooming function and canvas to convey messages rather than slides and bullet points.

* **Good for:** Non-linear presentations and illustrating processes and relationships.
* **Bad for:**Your presentations can be viewed by anyone unless you pay for membership.
* **Watch out for:**Zooming. Don’t go overboard with it, or you’ll risk making your audience seasick.
* **Tips:** If you’re using images in your Prezi, make sure they’re high-resolution; Prezi’s zoom feature can cause lower quality images to pixelate.

# **Infographics**

Infographics are graphical representations of information. They can be an effective means of displaying complex information in a simple and clear manner in your presentation.

* **Good for:**Data-driven presentations.
* **Bad for:** Anything else.
* **Watch out for:** It can be very time consuming to create a good infographic.
* **Tips:**Works well in conjunction with Prezi or PowerPoint to reveal focus on one area of the graphic at a time.

# **No visual aids**

Not using visual aids can be very effective if you want your audience use their imagination eg, if you are telling them a story.

* **Good for:**Confident speakers and short presentations.
* **Bad for:**Presenting data or complex ideas — in these circumstances it’s useful to use visual aids to help your audience to understand your meaning.
* **Watch out for:** Visuals can make explaining your examples easier. If you choose not to use them, you run the risk of your audience not understanding some of your points.
* **Tips:** Use cue cards with your key points on them if you’re concerned about forgetting what you want to say.

We’ve [collected a number of links to different presentation tools](https://padlet.com/MLEManchester/present-links), as well as some other useful resources such as colour scheme generators and image sources.

# Selecting what to display

When you come to design what is displayed on screen, consider the presentation trio.

## What you know

This refers to your background knowledge and research into your presentation topic. You should always have thoroughly researched your topic. Even though all of the information won’t make it into your presentation, you’ll be better prepared when it comes to answering questions.

## What you say

This means what you actually communicate during your presentation. Remember to only communicate the information that is directly relevant to your specific presentation topic, not everything you know about the area.

## **What you show**

This refers to visual aids that you display to the audience during your presentation. Keep your slides clear by only highlighting one key quote, image, statistic or diagram on each slide. Avoid overloading your audience with visuals.

# **The purpose of your slides**

Your slides are a visual aid for your audience; they are there to help to communicate your meaning by assisting your audience in understanding it during your talk. Each of your slides should focus on just one key message.

## **Your slides are not your script**

* **Don’t** read from your slides.
* **Because** people read a lot faster than you can speak; if you are reading verbatim from your slides, people will finish reading them before you finish speaking.
* **Instead,** use your slides as a prompt with key words.

## Your slides are not your handout…

* **Don’t** try to use your slides for two purposes.
* **Because** trying to make your slides useful both in the session and as a handout may lead to them being less useful for either purpose
* **Instead**, create a separate handout that will be meaningful to your audience when read outside of the session.

# Text

Text-only slides are best used when you’re discussing a quote, or you want to draw attention to one particular piece of information. It can be simple and elegant. In the example above, it’s a bit dull, and possibly not the best use of visuals

# **Infographic**

Infographics are a great way of showing mixed data. They can be quite complex and time consuming to design, but there are a number of websites that can provide customisable templates.

# Chart

Charts and graphs are great for giving a visual overview of a set of figures. Make sure that the legends and labels are all clearly visible and that the colour scheme matches that of the rest of your presentation.

# Image

One large image is great when setting the scene and when you’re giving your audience background information. Using images in place of words can reduce how often you turn to the screen and away from your audience.

# Design basics

Good presentation design should complement what you are communicating, highlighting key points and data that support what you are saying. In this section, we’ll look at some different ways you can put this into practice.

There are four key elements to designing a good set of slides.

## **Clarity**

Keep it simple! Remember that your visual aids should support your message, not distract from it. Focus on communicating just one key message per screen. Limit the use of animations to ensure they have impact.

Keep text to a minimum; your audience can’t read lots of text and listen to you at the same time. If you must have your audience read a key quotation or piece of text, stop talking and give them a moment to do so before continuing.

The size and placement of slide elements create meaning as to their significance and relationships; bear this in mind when designing your slides so that you don’t imply meaning that doesn’t exist such as making headings larger than body text. Larger text indicates it should be read first and this can cause confusion and accessibility issues.

## **Colours**

Choose a simple colour scheme and stick to it. Avoid using patterned backgrounds.

Consider the contrast of your colours; you need to ensure that the content on your slide is easily legible. If in doubt, a pale off-white background with dark text works well.

Your colour scheme might relate to the theme of your presentation.

## **Fonts**

Pick two good fonts and use them consistently throughout your presentation.

To emphasise a word, use bold, rather than underlining or italicising it.

Consider the context of your presentation when choosing your fonts. Fonts have personality; ensure that the fonts you choose convey the appropriate tone for your audience and purpose.

Avoid serif fonts such as Times New Roman which can be difficult to read from a distance.

Ensure heading fonts are larger than the rest of the text, 36pt is a good option for headings. Use a minimum of 22pt for other text on the slide.

## **Images**

Make sure images are clear, high quality and relevant to the point you are making.

When using pictures, photos or diagrams, use alternative text (alt text) to describe the image for people who may be using a screen reader.

Use photographs rather than clip art. There are loads of websites you can use to find great images that are free to use.

When resizing images, make sure you keep the original aspect ratio. A good tip is to only use the corner handles and whilst holding down the ‘Shift’ key. If your image doesn’t fit your slide, you can also try cropping it.

Position smaller images alongside text rather than behind it. When using a large image as the background, use a text box to position text where it will not be over the detail of the image and make sure the text box is filled not transparent.

## Slide design

When it comes to individual slides, there are a number of approaches you can take to maximise their impact. Have a look at these examples:

# Summary

Now that we’ve looked at all of the key areas in designing your presentation, it’s time to put it all together. Why not practise creating a slide or two to represent the following information:

“Mathematics is a subject that many people struggle to properly engage with and enjoy. Phrases such as “I don’t do Maths”, or “I’m just not a Maths person”, are very common, and sometimes even stated with pride. Statistics in the UK certainly bear this out, as roughly 4 in 5 adults currently have low levels of numeracy.”

To improve your design skills, you need to practise, experiment and look at other good designs.