

Should You Always Use Visual Aids in a Research Presentation?

Author

Enago Academy

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Slides are an Option, Not a Requirement

For anyone whose workweek includes one or more meetings or the infamous ‘town hall’ presentations, the prospect of yet another PowerPoint slide presentation is enough to generate much eye-rolling and audible groaning. It seems that visual aids are now expected to accompany every presentation. Is this some new political correctness campaign to acknowledge the needs of [visual learners](#)? Or have slides simply become the de facto tool for supporting both experienced and nervous presenters?

Ask Yourself Why?

For many nervous presenters, knowing that slides are available on the screen behind them can be very re-assuring. Your trepidation might cause you to completely blank on your notes, so you can turn around and re-orient yourself with what’s on the screen. Unfortunately, when slides are written to support the presenter rather than inform the audience, the resulting product is often a series of slides with few [graphics](#), and very small font so that the presenter can put everything from his or her notes onto the slides just in case.

This is a classic example of not stopping to ask *why* you are using visual aids in your presentation. A better question to ask is: *What* are you attempting to achieve with your presentation? [Successful presenters](#) don't just shove information into the faces of their audiences. They subscribe to the philosophy that knowledge transfer and retention requires audience engagement and entertainment.

All About Your Audience

The process of preparing for your presentation should not begin with deciding which slides or handouts to use. You know your subject, the location and technical capabilities of the venue, and you know how long you'll be on stage or leading the presentation in a conference room. That's all useful information, but the most important information you need in deciding what you want to achieve with your presentation is: Who is the audience, and what are their needs, wants and expectations? It won't matter how polished your graphics and handouts are if you do not engage with them and make them think about the content you are presenting.

Visuals Don't Compensate for Poor Presentation Skills

A bad presentation can seem like an extended comedy of errors. The presenter is clearly inexperienced or took no time to prepare or practice. The screen has PowerPoint slides crammed with bullet points in an illegible font size, which the presenter (turning his or her back to the audience) is reading off the screen. Fortunately, the audience doesn't see this as rude, because they are reading the same slides from the hard copy that they were given as a handout. How much engagement and retention will be achieved here?

Preparing for a presentation requires some honesty and humility. If you're not an experienced presenter, or your boss has asked you to pull together a presentation at the last minute on a subject you know little about, PowerPoint will not fix that for you. Don't assume that slides are an automatic requirement. A well-written and entertaining speech can be far more engaging, and if you tell your audience in advance that they will be given a comprehensive handout at the end, everyone will relax and focus on what you have to say. If you're too nervous to even contemplate being an engaging speaker, get some help from a colleague with presentation design experience, so that you can use visual aids to support your message rather than just giving you the safety net you think you need. Then practice as much as possible before the event. Even the most engaging speakers were nervous at first, and each of them probably has a horror story in their careers of broken equipment, lost scripts, and some bad cases of nausea.

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