

Using Images Effectively in Media

The most wasted opportunity in Powerpoint, Prezi and other presentation applications, or additionally in many digital storytelling projects, occurs when images are plopped in as fillers or placeholders without taking time to choose and consider how and why an image might enhance or deepen the audiences experience with your presentation content. Images are visual communication and existed long before formal spoken and written language.



Rock_art_bull.jpg, public domain image, licensed through Wikimedia Commons

When presenting to an audience it is important to consider two recognized communication paths: verbal & visual.

The visual is the one that the audience reacts to first or more immediately and will likewise retain. Psychologist Albert Mehrabian demonstrated that 93% of communication is nonverbal. Research at 3M Corporation concluded that we process visuals **60,000 times faster than text**. Further studies find that the human brain deciphers image elements simultaneously, while language is decoded in a linear, sequential manner taking more time to process.

Visuals as part of a presentation can do one of three things:

1. Emphasize the point that the rest of our effort is making.
2. Contradict it in some way.
3. Trigger or re-enforce retention of information.

And they do so in two specific manners:

- **Cognitively:** Graphics expedite and increase our level of communication. They increase comprehension, recollection, and retention. Visual clues help us decode text and attract attention to information or direct attention increasing the likelihood that the audience will remember.
- **Emotionally:** Pictures enhance or affect emotions and attitudes. They engage our imagination and heighten our creative thinking by stimulating other areas of our brain, which leads to a more profound and accurate comprehension. Emotions influence decision-making.

Dr. Lynell Burmark, Ph.D. Associate at the Thornburg Center for Professional Development and writer of several books and papers on visual literacy, said, "...unless our words, concepts, ideas are hooked onto an image, they will go in one ear, sail through the brain, and go out the other ear. Words are processed by our short-term memory where we can only retain about 7 bits of information (plus or minus 2). This is why, by the way, that we have 7-digit phone numbers. Images, on the other hand, go directly into long-term memory where they are indelibly etched."

Choosing the right image(s)

Start by exploring your own mind. What do you "see" when you are writing or reflecting on your presentation or script? If you want the audience to have the same visual then use it!

Considerations to keep in mind:

- An image is only effective if it is relevant to the content of your presentation. Images are visual communication – you can convey any idea more effectively through a relevant picture than by just using text or voice alone.
- *A picture is worth a thousand words!* Pictures make content more interesting and often more understandable. Although, think about how many pictures you should (or shouldn't) use. If one picture is worth 1,000 words, do you really need 5,000 words on the same point?
- *Seeing is believing!* Images can "prove your point" and convince the audience better.
- Select hi-res, clean and clear images. (see Image Resolution section below). If your image looks washed or pixilated on your screen, it will look much worse when projected.
- Avoid images with small details. Even though the projector may have made the image eight feet tall, you need to remember that your viewers are usually sitting anywhere from 10 to 100 feet away from the screen. Images with small, unclear text or details won't be seen.
- Don't be afraid to include text with images. This is especially true of captions that may be necessary for some pictures. Or even for credits and copyright notices, if you sourced the picture from a source that needs to be credited.
- Don't use images that are not copyright free. There's no excuse in ignoring copyright these days, especially with the amount of free visual content that is available.
- Do keep track of where you find and save images from in order to properly credit them.

Image Resolution Is the Key

Most projectors installed in college classrooms as well as the smaller portable ones used in conference rooms project their images at a resolution of 1024 x 768 pixels. Because the machine is transmitting at that resolution, an image of that resolution can be shown across the full screen without much loss of quality. If you aren't sure of the resolution of your image, right click on the file and view its properties. If you are planning on zooming in on a portion of an image always get a higher resolution (overall size) image so that you can zoom in on the pixels and not lose quality in the display of the image itself. When in doubt, go larger rather than smaller.

Most web search engines for images will give you a resolution preview when you mouse over the image.

Images with smaller resolutions should not be scaled up in size within the presentation software. They will distort and blur. Also, the effect of this distortion is more pronounced in the projected image than in the one you see on the screen of your computer. If it looks bad on your screen, discard and find a better one!

Where to Source Pictures?

Creative Commons: Creative Commons is essentially a license that allows distribution of many media types including pictures. Photographers can provide (license) their work for free under easy terms which benefit both the photographer and the user. For the end user, Creative Commons attributions make it clear if the pictures can be used in commercial applications, if changes can be made, and if any content can only be used for personal use. In all cases, an attribution as specified by the creator must be included when the picture is used. The details of this attribution are usually displayed along with the image on the source web site often in a series of icons or a link to a license page. Its easy to find Creative Commons images:

a. **Creative Commons** – Offers convenient access to search services provided by other independent organizations.

<http://search.creativecommons.org/>

b. **Google Images** – You need to access the *Advanced Image Search* option, and then select for the *Usage Rights* dropdown. Choose the *Free to use, share or modify, even commercially* option in the dropdown list.

https://www.google.com/advanced_image_search

c. **Wikimedia Commons** – You can find more than 10 million categorized, photos, illustrations, footage, sound clips, etc. here.

<http://commons.wikimedia.org/>

d. **Flickr** – There are more than a hundred million Creative Commons licensed images on Flickr, and 15 million of these have the most flexible "Attribution only" license.

<http://www.flickr.com/creativecommons/>

Pictures from Digital Cameras, Scanners, and Camera Phones

Can't find it? If it is easy and convenient enough to capture/scan/shoot it yourself, then do so.

This is usually the most efficient path for very specific things, like an object laid out next to a ruler to show scale, or a specific building/location that is readily near to you. Try to keep in mind some basic photography rules concerning composition (the rule of thirds) and lighting.