



Types and uses of visual aids

Visual aids have many uses when giving a presentation. Visuals can help:

- capture attention
- increase interest
- clarify an idea
- reinforce a concept
- provide a reference point e.g. the spelling of an unfamiliar word, or a chart showing trends.

However, your visual aids can't do all the work for you, and they shouldn't distract from the main content of your presentation.

Types of visual aids

- presentation software e.g. PowerPoint
- whiteboards
- handouts
- overhead transparencies (rarely used)

The pros and cons of individual types of visual aids

Presentation Software

There are a lot of programs and apps available to help you design visuals to accompany your talk. Here are just a few:

- Microsoft PowerPoint
- Prezi
- emaze
- Projqt
- Haiku Deck
- PowToon

See also [Online Presentation Software: 51 Alternatives to PowerPoint](#).

PowerPoint is probably the most common slideshow software in use. As a Western student, you can download it as part of Microsoft Office for free – see the '[Student Advantage](#)'. Other online presentation software is often free but might require a login to save your presentations.

The following table provides a list of points to consider when using PowerPoint.

Pros	Cons
→ PowerPoint allows you to create slideshows featuring embedded multimedia e.g. pictures, videos, music.	→ There are a couple of different versions around so make sure your version is compatible with the computer you will use to display your presentation.
→ A range of design options are available.	→ It's easy to get caught up in using animations, transitions, and fancy backgrounds – so remember to keep it simple!
→ Can be hands-free if you use a wireless presenter or presentation remote (you can also get an app for your phone that can do this!).	→ Requires you to stay near the computer to click to the next slide unless you have a hands-free device.
→ Comes with Microsoft Office and is available on university computers.	→ Somewhat limited when compared to specialist presentation software such as Prezi .

Regardless of which software or online tool you use to design your visual aids, you then need to connect a computer or other device to a data projector to project the image onto a screen. Most classrooms at Western should have a data projector, but check with your teacher to make sure one is available to you.

Also check whether a laptop is provided and if you can load your presentation from a USB stick, or if you will need to bring your own computer or tablet to connect – and if so, make sure you have the right kind of connector.

While you're presenting, take care not to block the projector with your body, and make sure you only include information that is strictly necessary.

Whether you use PowerPoint or another tool, make sure you're getting the best from it. See [10 tips on how to make slides that communicate your idea](#).

Whiteboards and Blackboards

Yes, we're talking old-school. It may be low-tech, but while not all classrooms or presentation rooms will have a data projector, it's rare that they won't have a whiteboard.

Pros	Cons
→ Readily available.	→ Need to have a proper whiteboard marker (NOT a permanent marker) for a whiteboard, and chalk for a blackboard.
→ Easily erased.	→ You have to turn away from your audience to write anything.
→ You can write as you go.	→ Can be time-consuming to write and you need to write neatly.

Handouts

This is perhaps another old-fashioned method, but there's still a place for handouts in presentations. By 'handout' we mean one or more sheets of paper with information relevant to your presentation, that you distribute to your audience before or after your talk.

Pros	Cons
→ The audience can make notes directly on the handout.	→ Printing and photocopying costs money.
→ You can give out a handout at the start of your talk and direct the audience's attention verbally, without physical interaction.	→ Not environmentally friendly – but you could create and distribute digital versions to save paper.
→ Can supplement other visual aids, for example by putting your references on the handout rather than on the PowerPoint.	→ Can distract the audience.
→ Can be interactive.	→ You need to anticipate numbers and ensure you have enough handouts.

General tips for visual aids

- Use all visual aids as a prompt, and don't read them word-for-word to the audience. Trust the audience to read the information for themselves.
- In addition to the above, don't put your whole talk on your visual aids. They need to supplement your speech, not substitute for it.
- Make sure the audience can see the visual from all points in the room.
- Use a large font – preferably 18pt or bigger – and make sure the text can be seen from the back of the room.
- Don't limit yourself to text – include pictures, symbols, graphs, and other visual representations where appropriate.
- Allow the audience time to read and absorb the visual.
- Keep your visual aids simple for maximum effect.
- One idea per slide is a good rule for PowerPoint.
- Have a backup plan in case technology lets you down, and be prepared to give your presentation without visuals if necessary.
- Practise using the aids in your presentation so you know exactly what to do and when.

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