

Best Practices for Choosing Visual Aids

Brief: Choose visual aids that are audience-focused, clear, understandable, and easy to incorporate into the flow of your presentation.

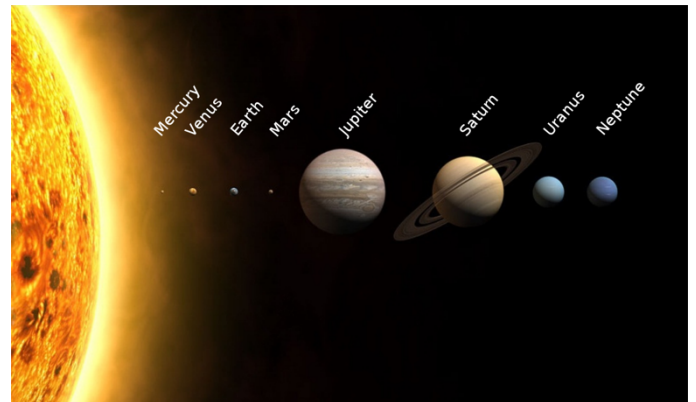
Learning Objective: Understand which factors to consider when selecting presentation aids.

Choose Audience-Focused Visuals Aids

When you reach the point in the speech development process when you're making decisions about your speech outline, it's also time to think about which main points and sub-points you want to reinforce with visual aids. If you choose well, your visual aids will help your audience follow the structure and flow of your presentation.

Your visual aids—like your entire speech presentation—should be audience-focused. Recall that creating an audience focus involves adapting your speech content to your audience's prior knowledge, interests, demographics, and psychographics.

Before choosing or preparing a visual aid, ask yourself: "Will this visual aid be appropriate for my audience?" If you're speaking to your fellow astronomy majors about an aspect of our solar system, for example, you don't need to include a basic image of the order of the planets in your presentation. You can assume that your audience knows this information. If you're speaking to school children, on the other hand, this image could be helpful for them, as they may know this information or be able to recall it offhand.



Choose Clear Visuals Aids

Your audience should, first and foremost, be able to see (and—if applicable— read) your visual aids. You don't want your audience members in the back of the room, for example, to have to strain to see a photograph or read a graph.

In addition, you want your visual aids to be easily understood, which typically means erring on the side of simplicity. If you think your speech topic warrants including more complex visual aids, you will need to devote time in your presentation to explaining their significance.

Choose Visuals Aids You Understand and Can Effectively Present

If you're using visual aids that you did not create yourself, you want to make sure that you thoroughly understand them. This way, you can be sure that they support your points or sub-points in the way that you intend. If, for example, you are presenting a speech about climate change, you might show a graph highlighting the recent rise in atmospheric carbon dioxide levels. While the graph could be a powerful visual aid, you want to make sure that you understand each element of the graph, including its author, the values being measured, and its implications. Before you share a visual you didn't create yourself, ask yourself: "If an audience member asked me a question about this visual during the Q&A session, would I likely be able to answer it?"

In addition to making sure you understand your visuals, you also want to make sure you can incorporate them smoothly into your presentation. You don't want them to interrupt the flow of your speech. Before you present, identify in your outline exactly when you will present each visual aid, what each visual means, and how you plan to present it. Be sure to rehearse with your visual aids before your presentation so you can be as effective as possible in helping your audience engage with your topic, understand your presentation, and remember your key points.

From Concept to Action

One of the best ways to determine if your visual aids will be appropriate and easily understood by your audience is to ask a sample of people to take a look at your pictures, graphs, and charts and tell you what they think they mean (without your verbal explanation). If your audience will be comprised of fellow students who are also giving speeches, consider asking a few of them to help you assess your visual aids and offer to return the favor. Pay attention to their initial reactions to your images—do they nod their heads or do they have confused looks on their faces? Listen carefully to their questions. If their questions indicate that they clearly don't understand your visuals, thank them for their feedback and go back to the drawing board!

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