5.4 Preparing Slides for Presentations

A good slide presentation that is clear and easy to understand, making points that hold the audience attention always makes a favourable impression and communicates efficiently. Using well designed slides is so crucial to any presentation, yet many presenters take too little time thinking through and designing on their slides. Inexperienced presenters can be very defensive about their bad slides when practicing their talk as presumably the slides are clear to them and took a lot of effort; experienced presenters usually show no such attachment. Most people in the audience will be kind about bad slides (especially if the presenter is clearly inexperienced) and it should be noted even experienced presenters use some shockers on occasion.

Slide presentations are an exercise in efficient transfer of highly condensed and complex information from presenter to audience members. Achieving this transfer involves a very different set of skills to those needed to write a manuscripts or lead tutorial. With that in mind, below are a few points to consider.

Avoid clutter
The audience has a very short time to decode what the slide is saying, and having too much dense information will impede that. The eye needs to be drawn to points of interest that can easily be understood. Related to this…

Don't use big blocks of text
Reading a lot of text while someone is talking can be a little tricky. Reading a big block of text while the presenter is reading it out is not difficult but is hardly the most effective use of time. Text on slides must be digested quickly, so the text has to be broken down into small blocks that are visually easy to gasp. Often short dot points are good.

Text size should be large and bold font
Large text is easy to read. 18 point font often works well, with larger for titles. Using a sans serif font like Aria looks good for projections, but whatever is used should be consistently throughout. Don't use shadowing on fonts as a rule, as they can look confusing at a distance and underlining similarly is less effective than on the page.

Make the presentation highly structured
Presentations should be predictable, broken down into easily understood sections on slides with similar style and layout. Information presented across several one slides should use similar colouring conventions to allow cross comparisons.

Don't try to make a lot of points
With one slide it is usually best to make one main point or present one set of data, unless the slide is a summary slide.

Be careful with data tables
Data tables can be hard to read at a distance if large and can be hard to follow if visually complex. The technique here is not to put everything on screen in tiny writing and talk vaguely over it. Few people will follow it if they have not seen that data before.

Minimise the amount of data presented and make its structure simple. Use colour and bold judiciously to emphasise particular data point and use fly-ins (if using PowerPoint or similar package) in sequence to highlight points judiciously as they are mentioned. The technique is to step through the data in a structured way which helps the audience understand and read the data. First introduce the data and what it represents (with an informative

title above it), describe the data categories then mention salient features and important points. It is hard to take in a data tables quickly without this sort of guidance from the speaker, but note that if the next slide has a table with a similar structure it can be presented more quickly.

Be even more careful with graphs
As with data tables use colour, bolding and occasional fly-ins to delineate the major points of interest in the graph and step through the data in a highly structured way. Make sure that text is highly legible at a distance.

Avoid excessive referencing
Referencing work is a good habit, but it can be distracting and the audience cannot easily check it in a talk. Best is a simple reference near the bottom of the slide. If the reference is notable the speaker should mention it, otherwise leave it as a simple testament that the data is credible.

Use pictures and images where possible.
In a multimedia presentation it is much easier to use illustrative pictures than blocks of text, so they should be used liberally. Put any text close to the image it refers to. It helps the speaker remember what to say if the slides are distinctive. Having too many images is usually referred to as having a 'busy' slide and that is never a compliment.

Length of talk
As a rule the longer the talk the easier it is to do it. Short talks have to leave out a lot and compress the information they are communicating. Long talks don't, so they don't need to be as carefully structured.

Use colour carefully
Make sure that colours contrast well and are highly visible on the screen. It is often a good idea to check this before the talk as a test with a projector. Avoid garish colours unless impact is needed, and then don't overdo it and bombard the audience till they flinch. Dark text or shapes on neutral light background works well. Flashing or spiralling colours should not be used as they are very distracting in a talk. When presenting a theme across several slides it is best to use the same colours – e.g., if survival rates of group A are red and group B blue on one slide, use the same colours for group A and group B data on other slides. This makes the data much easier to follow as the talk progresses.

Check grammar and spelling
It is strange how easy it is to miss mistakes when the text is large.

Don't put in too many slides
Too many slides for a fixed length talk means too much rapid talking. Since talking needs to be slow and measured, that is bad. A rule of thumb is one slide per 40-60 seconds, but it depends on the slides and their complexity.

Practice the talk
Always a good idea to do this. Check the presentation works well, especially any inserted films.

Show your slides to someone else
Present the talk, or at least the slides to someone else as you prepare. There is so much that we don't see in our own work that it needs the perspective of another person. If you remember nothing else, remember this.

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