42 VISION TRUMPS ALL THE SENSES

Half of the brain's resources are dedicated to seeing and to interpreting what we see. Maybe this is why presenters spend so much time and energy working on their PowerPoint slides, often at the expense of honing the message or practicing their talk. Just because vision is so important doesn't mean that it should be the main channel for your message. And it certainly doesn't mean that your PowerPoint slides should take all your thought, time, and energy. In fact, people will be paying much more attention to you, the room, and the other people in the room. Visuals can enhance what you say—maybe—but they aren't all that there is.

Because vision is so important, you actually need to *minimize* what you show, since it will interfere with other channels, such as the auditory. In order for what you are saying to be heard and listened to over what is going on visually, you actually need to minimize visual distraction. In order to make sure that people are paying attention to what you are saying, you should have LESS visual stimuli.

MAKE SURE IMAGES FIT THE MESSAGE

If you use a picture or photo as a visual on your PowerPoint slide, make sure that the visual matches the message. Sometimes presenters go overboard in the other direction: They get the message that they shouldn't use too much text, so they have dozens of slides with pictures and photos. Don't use too many pictures and don't use pictures that don't match what you are trying to communicate.

The secret "b" key on your keyboard

There doesn't always have to be a slide showing. It's okay to use slides some of the time and then not use them other times. For example, let's say you are in the middle of your presentation and you have something visual to show, but now you are going to tell a story and you don't have a visual to go with the story. If you are using PowerPoint, just press the b key on your computer; your screen, as well as the screen in front of the room, will go blank. When you want PowerPoint to display again, just press the b key again.

Stories from the Field

"While teaching at an Australian university, I attended a lecture that one of the professors was delivering to over 350 students. On the screen went page after page of 11-point font, with hundreds of words to the page. Only the first few rows of the theater had any hope of reading the small text. The next 10 rows would have had to concentrate to make out the words, and the rest of the rows had no hope whatsoever. No one had any serious chance of reading the slides, listening to the professor, and taking any meaningful notes at the same time. Students started leaving. The trickle became a stream and then a torrent."

—Farley Wright

If you have slides where things fly around or move a lot, it will be visually distracting and people won't be listening to you and your message. Presenters like to use the feature whereby material doesn't appear on the slide when the slide first displays; the material is displayed when the presenter clicks a button or key. This approach is okay, because it prevents your audience from reading the entire screen before you've had an opportunity to discuss a particular item on the screen. However, this technique shouldn't be all that necessary, because you shouldn't have so much text on your slide that you have to figure out the best way to show it all!

Other visual distractions could include people coming and going in the room or the fact that you are wearing very bright colors or doing something repetitive (such as nervously pacing back and forth).

Takeaways

- Put more energy into figuring out your message and how you will say it than you do in creating your slides.
- Don't wear clothes that are distracting. Wear muted colors instead of a bright pattern.
- Make a video of yourself speaking and watch it. If you have any tics or distracting mannerisms (such as jingling keys in your pocket or pulling at your tie), fix the situation and practice to remove the distraction.

43 PEOPLE READ IN A CERTAIN DIRECTION

The fact that people read in a certain direction (left to right for some languages, right to left for some, top to bottom for others) may not seem like it is crucial to the effectiveness of your presentation, but it is. Think about the setup the last time you gave a presentation. Assuming you used slides of some kind, the slides were on a screen—possibly/probably on a screen that was larger than you are. So that is the first problem—people will tend to look at the screen and not at you. Now add to this where the screen is and where you are.

If you are presenting to an audience where people read left to right, but you are on the "wrong" side of the screen, then most people will not even see you during most of the presentation (**Figure 43.1** and **Figure 43.2**). The slides should not be the focus of the presentation. If people are just there to look at slides, you could have, and should have, sent them a report instead. If you are giving a presentation, then you are the critical part of the message, not your slides.

FIGURE 43.1 The "wrong" side to be standing on if your audience reads left to right

FIGURE 43.2 The "right" side to be standing on if your audience reads left to right

HOW TO INFLUENCE THE ROOM SETUP

If you show up at the last minute and the room setup is not the way you want it to be, there isn't much you can do to fix it at that point. So show up early and see if you can ask for changes.

Even better, send a diagram ahead of time showing how you prefer to have the screen set up and the front of the room set up.

In many venues there is a lectern where your laptop must go, and that lectern may not be movable because of cords and wiring. The lectern might be on the wrong side, and you don't want to have to stay at the lectern anyway. So purchase your own presenter remote and bring it with you whenever you speak. These are small devices you hold in your hand that allow you to change slides back and forth. My favorite is the Logitech model. Get a simple one and practice using it. It will free you from having to stand near your computer.

Use the laser pointer sparingly

One of the most distracting things you can do is to abuse your laser pointer by moving it and jiggling it around. Watch out for this nervous tic. A small beam of light moving up and down or in circles is very distracting.

Takeaways

- If you will be showing slides on a screen or monitor, rearrange the equipment and setup so that you are the first thing people see when they scan the front of the room. If you are in a culture that reads left to right, this means making sure that you are to the left of the screen as the audience looks at you.
- Arrive early to the room where you are presenting so that you can figure out where you should be in relation to the equipment or to the other people in the room. Rearranging the setup may take some time and may require help from the meeting organizer, so give yourself plenty of time.
- If possible, send a drawing to the meeting organizer that shows how you would like the room and the stage area to be set up. Meeting organizers appreciate getting this information ahead of time.
- If you are using slides and a laser pointer, don't move your pointer on the screen unless you need to.

44 IT'S A MYTH THAT UPPERCASE LETTERS ARE INHERENTLY HARD TO READ

You've probably heard that words in uppercase letters are harder to read than those in mixed case or lowercase. You've probably even heard some kind of percentage cited, such as "between 14 and 20 percent harder." The story goes that we read by recognizing the shapes of words and groups of words. Words in mixed-case or lowercase letters have unique shapes. Words in uppercase letters have the same shape—a rectangle of a certain size—so, in theory, they're harder to distinguish (**Figure 44.1**).

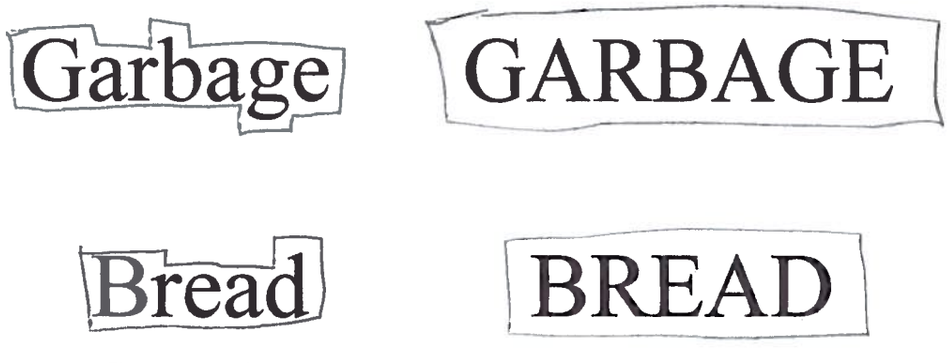

FIGURE 44.1 The word shape theory

This explanation sounds plausible, but it's not really accurate. There's no research showing that the shapes of words help us read more accurately or more quickly. A psycholinguist named James Cattell came up with that idea in 1886. There was some evidence for it then, but more recent work by Kenneth Paap (1984) and Keith Rayner (1998) has revealed that what we're actually doing when we read is recognizing and anticipating letters. And then, based on the letters, we recognize the word.

SO, IS UPPERCASE HARDER TO READ?

We *do* actually read all-uppercase text more slowly, but only because we don't see it as often. Most of what we read is in mixed case, so we're used to it. If you practice reading text in all-uppercase letters, you'll eventually read that text as fast as you read mixed case. This doesn't mean you should start using uppercase letters for everything. Since people are unused to reading that way, it will slow them down. And these days, text in all uppercase is perceived as "shouting." So feel free to use it—but use it sparingly.

A good summary of the research on uppercase

Kevin Larson wrote a great article summarizing the research on uppercase versus mixed case: http://www.microsoft.com/typography/ctfonts/wordrecognition.aspx

Stories from the Field

I was about to step onto the stage at a TEDx conference to give an 18-minute presentation I had put a lot of time and energy into. There were 650 people in the audience.

The conference manager said to me, "Make your talk shorter—we're behind schedule!"

On top of this, the remote control to advance the slides wasn't working, so I had to extend my palm to a guy in the wings to tell him to show the next slide during my talk.

Here are two lessons from this incident:

1. Practice your talk over and over until you know it so well that you can deliver it on autopilot. This way, you'll have mental capacity to spare to adjust your speech on the fly and remain present enough so you have good rapport with your audience.
2. List everything that could go wrong before or during your speech, and have a plan for each eventuality so you still come out on top.

—Christopher John Payne

Takeaways

- Use all-uppercase text sparingly in your presentation.
- It's OK to use all-uppercase text for headlines and when you want to grab attention.
- If you've designed your presentation for maximum impact, you won't have a lot of slides, and the slides that you do have won't have much text, so using uppercase text for emphasis is fine.

45 TITLES AND HEADLINES PROVIDE CRITICAL CONTEXT

Read this paragraph:

First you sort the items into like categories. Using color for sorting is common, but you can also use other characteristics, such as texture or type of handling needed. Once you have sorted the items, you are ready to use the equipment. You want to process each category from the sorting separately. Place one category in the machine at a time.

What is the paragraph about? It's hard to understand. But what if I give you the same paragraph with a title:

Using your new washing machine

First you sort the items into like categories. Using color for sorting is common, but you can also use other characteristics, such as texture or type of handling needed. Once you have sorted the items, you are ready to use the equipment. You want to process each category from the sorting separately. Place one category in the machine at a time.

The paragraph is still poorly written, but now at least it is understandable.

People use different parts of the brain to process words

Words are processed in different parts of the brain depending on what you're doing with them. Viewing or reading words, listening, speaking, generating verbs—all of these word activities engage different parts of the brain, as shown in **Figure 45.1**.

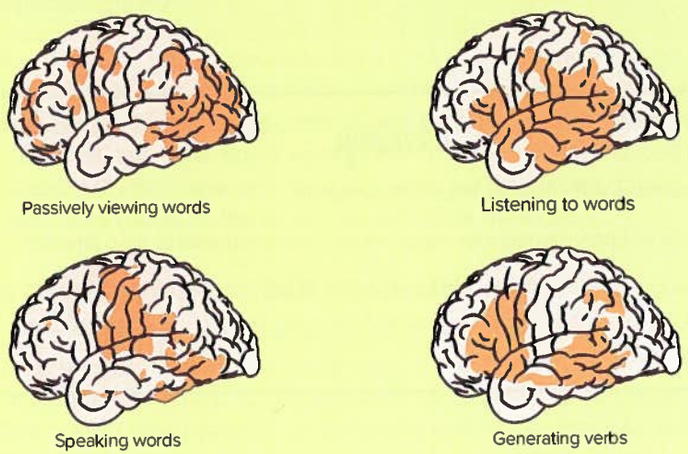

FIGURE 45.1 Different parts of the brain process words

Takeaways

* If you use slides in your presentation, use headlines and titles to make the information easier for your audience to grasp and organize.
* Remember, however, that the goal is to have the minimum possible number of words, the minimum possible number of slides with words, and the minimum possible number of slides. You can always say a title or headline; you don't have to provide it for your audience to read.

46 HARD TO READ = HARD TO DO

People have been debating which fonts are better, easier to read, or most appropriate for centuries. One such debate centers on the use of two types of fonts: serif and sans serif. Some argue that sans serif typefaces are easier to read because they are plain; others contend that serif fonts are easier to read because the serifs draw the eye toward the next letter. In fact, research shows no difference in comprehension, reading speed, or preference between serif and sans serif fonts.

People identify letters through pattern recognition

How is it that you can recognize all of the marks in **Figure 46.1** as the letter *A*?

FIGURE 46.1 We can recognize many variations of a letter.

You haven't memorized all of these versions of the letter *A*. Instead, you've formed a memory pattern of what an *A* looks like. When you see something similar, your brain recognizes the pattern.

Designers use fonts to evoke a mood, brand, or association. Some font families evoke a time period (old-fashioned versus modern), whereas others convey seriousness or playfulness. In terms of readability, however, the font you choose is not critical as long as it is not so decorative as to make it hard to identify the letters. Some fonts interfere with the brain's ability to recognize patterns.

Figure 46.2 shows different decorative fonts. The first font is relatively easy to read; the others become progressively more difficult. They make it hard for the brain to recognize the patterns of the letters.

There are many fonts that are easy to read. Any of them are fine to use. But avoid a font that is so decorative that it starts to interfere with pattern recognition in the brain.

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There are many fonts that are easy to read. Any of them are fine to use. But avoid a font that is so decorative that it starts to interfere with pattern recognition in the brain.

FIGURE 46.2 Some decorative fonts are readable, but others are not.

Learn more about font type, typography, and readability

If you're interested in reading the research about font type, typography, and readability, check out these two great Web sites:

www.alexpoole.info/academic/literaturereview.html

http://typoface.blogspot.com/2009/12/typeface-or-font-readability-which.html

IF A FONT IS HARD TO READ, THE MEANING OF THE TEXT WILL BE LOST

Hyunjin Song and Norbert Schwarz (2008) gave people written instructions on how to do a physical exercise. If the instructions were in an easy-to-read font (Arial), people estimated that it would take about 8 minutes to do the exercise and that it wouldn't be too difficult. They were willing to incorporate the exercise into their daily workout. But if the instructions were given in an overly decorative font (Brush Script MT Italic), people estimated it would take almost twice as long—15 minutes—to do the exercise, and they rated the exercise as being difficult to do (**Figure 46.3**). They were also less likely to be willing to incorporate it into their routine.

Tuck your chin into your chest, and then lift your chin upward as far as possible. 6-10 repetitions.
Lower your left ear toward your left shoulder and then your right ear toward your right shoulder. 6-10 repetitions.

Tuck your chin into your chest, and then lift your chin upward as far as possible. 6-10 repetitions.
Lower your left ear toward your left shoulder and then your right ear toward your right shoulder. 6-10 repetitions.

FIGURE 46.3 People who were given instructions in a simple font estimated that the exercise would take 8 minutes to complete—about half the time of those who were given instructions in a hard-to-read font.

Takeaways

- Serif and sans serif fonts are equal in terms of readability.
- Unusual or overly decorative fonts can interfere with pattern recognition and slow down reading.
- Don't use overly decorative fonts on your slides. If people have trouble reading the font, they will transfer that feeling of difficulty to the meaning of the presentation itself and decide that the subject matter is hard to do or understand.

47 FONT SIZE MATTERS

When you read the chapter entitled "How to Craft Your Presentation," I hope you will consider carefully whether you need slides at all and, if you do use slides, whether those slides should have any words on them. Assuming that you have decided you are using slides, and that the slides have words, make sure you use a font that's large enough for people to see. The font should be big enough for people to read it without strain. It's not just older people who need fonts to be big; younger people also complain when fonts are too small to read.

Some fonts can be the same size but look bigger because of their x-height. The x-height is literally the height of the lowercase letter *x* in the font family. Different fonts have different x-heights, and as a result, some fonts look larger than others, even though they are the same point size.

Figure 47.1 shows how font size and x-height are measured.

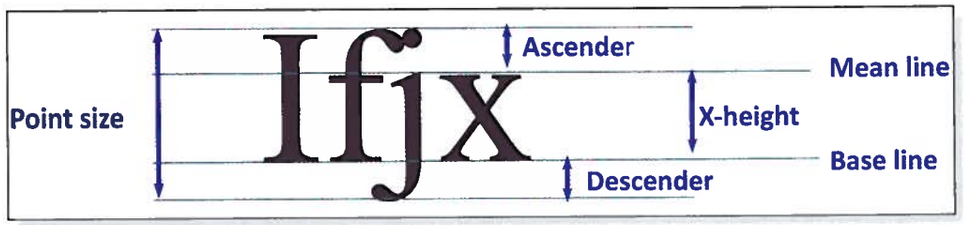

FIGURE 47.1 How font size and x-height are measured

Some newer font families, such as Tahoma and Verdana, have been designed with large x-heights so they are easier to read on a screen. **Figure 47.2** shows different font families that are all the same point size. Some look bigger, however, because of their larger x-height.

HOW BIG SHOULD THE FONT BE?

How big the font needs to be depends in large part on how far your audience is from the screen. There is an actual formula (see http://www.hf.faa.gov/webtraining/visualdisplays/Text/size1a.htm) for calculating the size the letters should be. It's based on the distance the viewer is from the screen. It's a complicated formula, so I've provided the link to it, but not the details of the formula.

All the fonts in this illustration are the same size, but some look larger than others because the x-height of different font families vary. This one is Arial.

All the fonts in this illustration are the same size, but some look larger than others because the x-height of different font families vary. This one is Times New Roman.

All the fonts in this illustration are the same size, but some look larger than others because the x-height of different font families vary. This one is Verdana.

All the fonts in this illustration are the same size, but some look larger than others because the x-height of different font families vary. This one is Tahoma.

FIGURE 47.2 A large x-height can make a font look larger.

A more "usable" set of guidelines is by Dave Paradi from ThinkOutsideTheSlide.com. **Figure 47.3** is a table from Dave's Web site that shows how big your font should be for comfortable viewing, based on how far your audience is from the screen.

The assumptions for the table are that

- ★ People have visual acuity of at least 20/40.
- ★ You are using a slide with a 4:3 aspect ratio (most screens and monitors).
- ★ The slide fills the screen.

To use the table, find the intersection of your screen size and the font you are using. The number at that intersection is the maximum number of feet from the screen that someone should be in order to comfortably read text.

Screen Width (inches) \ Font size (in points)	18	24	28	32	36	40	44
36	19	27	31	34	38	42	46
48	25	36	41	46	51	56	61
60	32	44	51	57	64	70	76
72	38	53	61	69	76	84	92
84	44	62	71	80	89	98	107
96	51	71	81	92	102	112	122
120	64	89	102	114	127	140	153

FIGURE 47.3 How big your font should be in relation to screen size and distance from the screen.

Takeaways

- * Before spending time deciding how big a font needs to be in order to be legible to everyone in the room, rethink whether you should have text on a screen at all.
- * If you do need text on the screen, it is hopefully a heading or a short phrase—then you can use a large font size.
- * If you are using a font size smaller than 30 points, you likely have too much text on your slide.