Visual Aids

Two good reasons for using a visual aid:
1. Use a visual aid to communicate information that is too complex to communicate verbally.
2. Use a visual aid for visual impact.

The visual aid should be:
1. **Relevant.** Make sure that the visual aid is directly related to the content of your speech.
2. **Appropriate.** A visual aid should suit your audience and occasion (i.e., there should be a “match” between the visual aid and the audience – charts and graphs for scientists; pictures for kids; etc.)
3. **Attractive.** The visual aid should look neat, professional, and attractive. Avoid complex visuals. Avoid chartjunk (non-essential clutter), chartoons (tacky symbols and clip art), and excessive fonts.
4. **Visible.** The visual aid must be large enough to be seen by everyone in the room. If not everyone can see it, then it becomes a frustration rather than an aid.
5. **Varied.** In most cases, it’s a good idea to use several different visual aids. This helps to keep your audience interested.
6. **Enough.** Include enough visual aids to make your ideas clear and compelling.

What kinds of visual aids are there?
- Photographs, slides
- Diagrams
- Renderings (artist’s conceptions)
- Graphs
- Charts
- Time lines
- Maps
- Simple schematics
- Videotapes and DVDs
- Films
- Objects and models
- Flip charts and posters
- Blackboards
- Handouts
- Overhead projector slides
- Computer presentations (PowerPoint, etc.)
- Anything that will graphically communicate your point

Make the most of your visual aid.
1. Adapt the visual aid to the size of the audience.
2. Stand to the side of the visual aid as you explain it to avoid obstructing the view of your audience or decreasing the directness of your communication.
3. If you illustrate by making drawings during your speech, explain each drawing as you draw it. Periods of silence permit interest to wane. If you plan to use complicated drawings, put them on the blackboard in advance (or create an overhead slide).
4. Use a pointer to refer to parts of the visual aid as you explain them. A general reference to a visual aid can confuse the audience.
5. Do not display your visual aid until you are ready to use it; an unused chart is distracting. A visual aid should never get ahead of you (i.e., you introduce the topic and use the visual to supplement your speech, not the other way around).
6. Remove the visual aid when you have finished using it. A visual aid should never get behind you.
7. Avoid more than five lines to any one visual. No more than five words to any one line.
8. Stay with one subject per visual. Don’t confuse the audience by having all of your major points on one visual (unless you’re using it to introduce your speech).
9. If you don’t want to talk about something, don’t put it on a visual. Only use that information that is pertinent to your speech.

Using specific types of visual aid formats:

- Overhead projector. Make sure that it is on the appropriate side relative to your “handedness” – on the right for right-handers, on the left for left-handers. It’s easier to point at the screen than it is to point at the slide on the projector. If you want the audience to look at the screen, you look at it. If you want the audience to look at you, you look at them.
- Chalkboard. Always start with a blank board. Erase everything that is not associated with your speech. The exception is if you have drawn something on the board that you will reveal through the speech. When not writing, put the chalk down. Don’t lean on the chalkboard or chalk tray. Write with the chalk at an angle to avoid squeaking.
- Videotapes/DVDs. Have the video cued to the spot you want to show the audience. Make sure the volume is appropriate in advance. Again, if you want the audience to look at the screen, you look at it. If you want the audience to look at you, you look at them. The video clip should supplement and compliment your presentation, not act as a substitute for any point that you’re making. Videos can be used in the introduction or body, but should be avoided in your conclusion (unless used as a clincher or residual message to a corresponding attention-getter).
- Handouts. The handout should be able to stand on its own. That is, you won’t be there to answer questions like other visual aids presented during your speech. It’s not really a good idea to provide a handout during a presentation because your audience will read it (and not listen to you!). By providing your handout to the audience during your presentation, you give control of the speech to them. With handouts, they should match whatever visual aid you’re providing during your speech, and you should precisely direct the audience through it. They should be reading only what you want them to read.
- PowerPoint™ slides. Getting sidetracked by all the “bells and whistles” available for presenting using Microsoft PowerPoint is very easy. Remember, don’t create a “dog and pony show” just because you can. Avoid distracting the audience with complex, over-designed slides with annoying, loud transitions. The message should speak louder than the medium.

For further reading: