FOREWORD BY GUY KAWASAKI

presentationzen

Simple Ideas on Presentation Design and Delivery

Garr Reynolds

New Riders

VOICES THAT MATTER™

6

Presentation Design: Principles and Techniques

When I was an employee with Sumitomo in the mid-90s, I discovered that Japanese business people often used the term "case-by-case" (*keisu bai keisu*) when discussing details of future events or strategy. This frustrated me since I was used to more concrete plans and absolutes and making decisions rather quickly. I learned, though, that context, circumstance, and a kind of "particularism" were very important to the Japanese with whom I worked. Today, I might use Japanese expressions like *jyoukyou ni yotte* (judgment depends on circumstance) or *toki to baai ni yotte* (depends on time and circumstance) when discussing what techniques or designs to use for a particular presentation, for example. I used to think that "it depends" was a weak statement, a cop-out of sorts. Now I see that it is wise. Without a good knowledge of the place and circumstance, and the content and context of a presentation, it is difficult to say this is "appropriate" and that is "inappropriate" necessarily, let alone to judge what is "good" or "bad." There are no cookie-cutter approaches to design. Graphic design is as much art as science.

Nonetheless, there are some general guidelines that most appropriate and strong slide designs share. There are a few basic and fundamental concepts and design principles that if properly understood, can indeed help the average person create presentation visuals that are far more effective. One could fill several volumes with design principles and techniques. In this chapter, though, I'll exercise restraint and elaborate on just a few principles along with practical examples and a few techniques. First, let's look at what is meant by design.

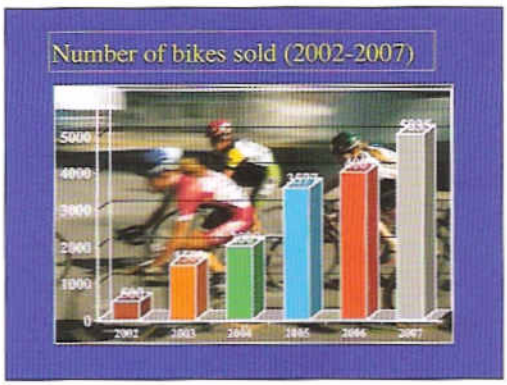
Signal vs Noise Ratio

The Signal-to-Noise Ratio (SNR) is a principle borrowed from more technical fields such as radio communications and electronic communication in general, but the principle itself is applicable to design and communication problems in virtually any field. For our purposes, the SNR is the ratio of relevant to irrelevant elements or information in a slide or other display. The goal is to have the highest signal-to-noise ratio possible in your slides. People have a hard time coping with excessive cognitive strain. There is simply a limit to a person's ability to process new information efficiently and effectively. Aiming for a higher SNR is an attempt to make things easier for people. Understanding can be hard enough without the excessive and the nonessential bombardment by our visuals that are supposed to be playing a supportive role.

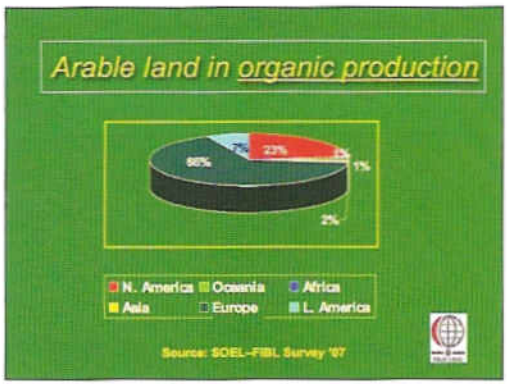
Ensuring the highest possible signal-to-noise ratio means communicating (designing) clearly with as little degradation to the message as possible. Degradation to the visual message can occur in many ways, such as with the selection of inappropriate charts, using ambiguous labels and icons, or unnecessarily emphasizing items such as lines, shapes, symbols, and logos that do not play a key role in support of the message. In other words, if the item can be removed without compromising the visual message, then strong consideration should be given to minimizing the element or removing it altogether. For example, lines in grids or tables can often be made quite thin, lightened, or even removed. And footers and logos, etc. can usually be removed with good results (assuming your company "allows" you to do so).

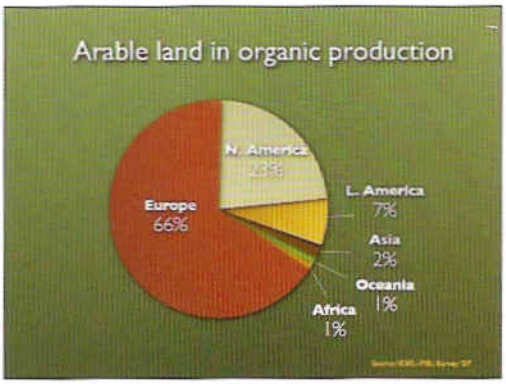
In *Visual Explanations: Images and Quantities, Evidence and Narrative* (Graphics Press), Edward Tufte refers to an important principle in harmony with SNR called "the smallest effective difference." "Make all visual distinctions as subtle as possible," says Tufte, "but still clear and effective." If the message can be designed with fewer elements, then there is no point in using more.

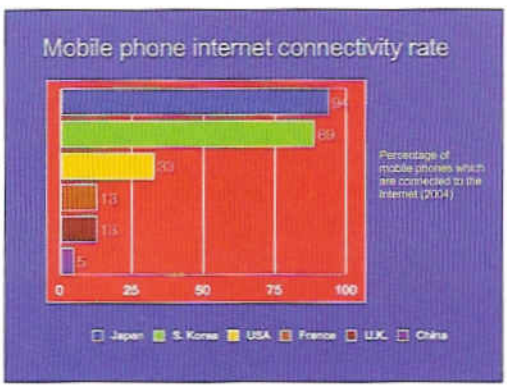
OPPOSITE PAGE *The slides on the left side are the orginals. The signal-to-noise ratio is improved in the slides on the right by removing nonessential elements and minimizing other elements.*

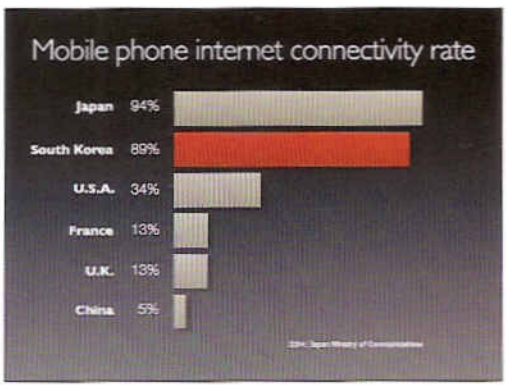

Number of bikes sold (2002-2007)
5000
4000
3000
2000
1000
0
5035
3577
2002
2003
2004
2005
2006
2007


Over 5,000 bikes sold in 2007
500
1,500
2,009
3,577
4,007
5,035
'02
'03
'04
'05
'06
'07

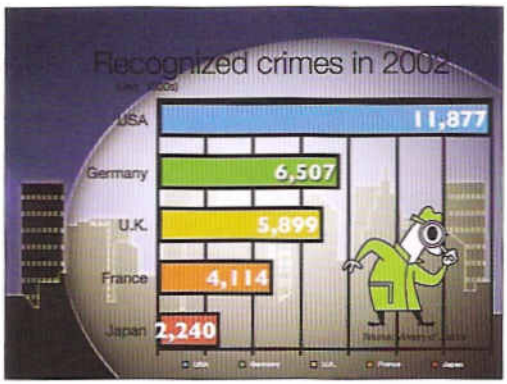

Arable land in organic production
23%
1%
2%
N. America
Oceania
Africa
Asia
Europe
L. America
Source: SOEL-FIBL Survey '07

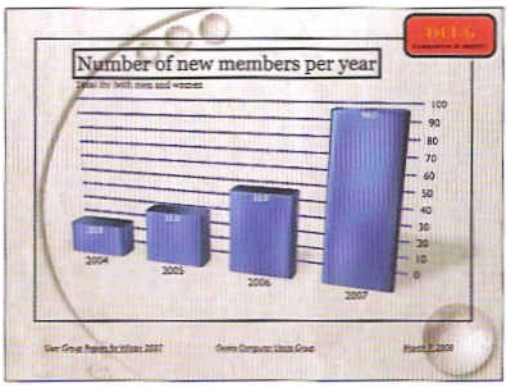

Arable land in organic production
N. America
23%
Europe
66%
L. America
7%
Asia
2%
Oceania
1%
Africa
1%

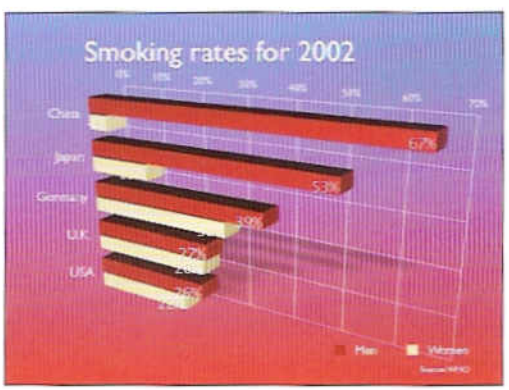

Mobile phone internet connectivity rate
94
89
33
13
13
5
0
25
50
75
100
Percentage of mobile phones which are connected to the Internet (2004)
Japan
S. Korea
USA
France
U.K.
China


Mobile phone internet connectivity rate
Japan 94%
South Korea 89%
U.S.A. 34%
France 13%
U.K. 13%
China 5%

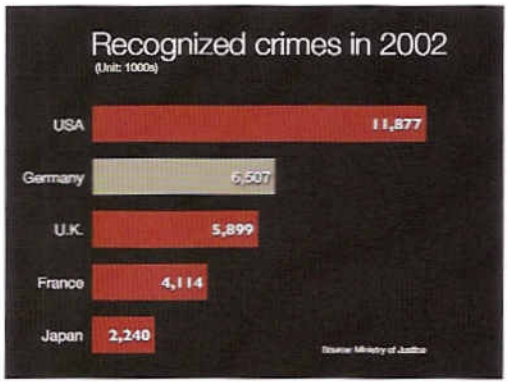
BEFORE

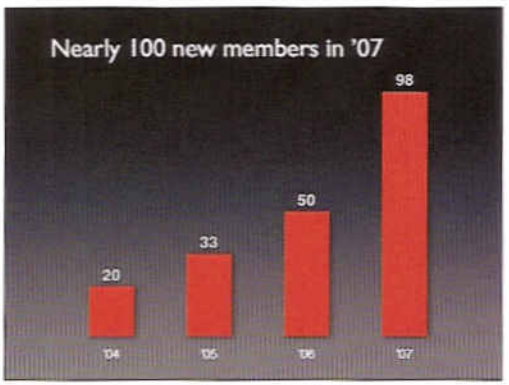


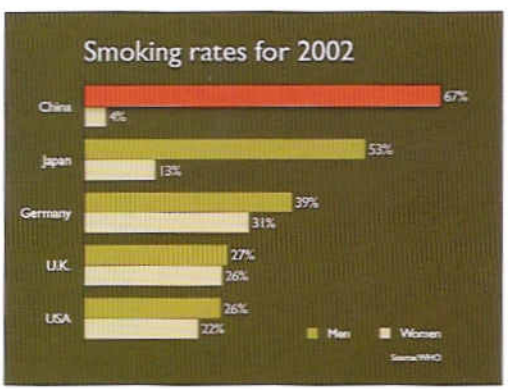




AFTER

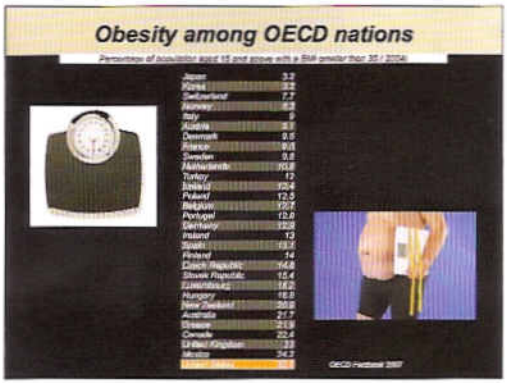




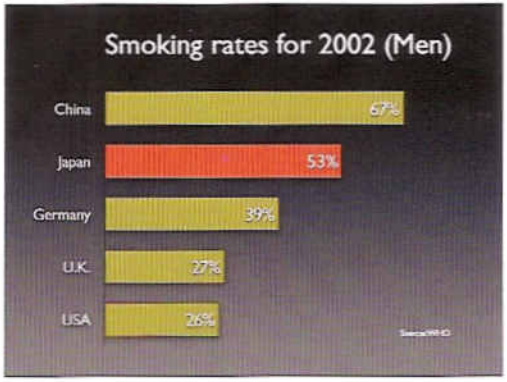


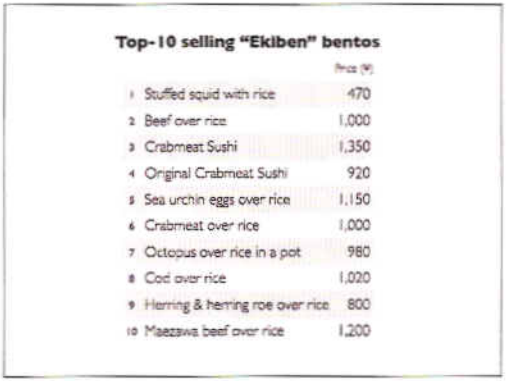
BEFORE ▼

	Top-10 selling "Ekiben" bentos (2004)	Price (¥)
1	Stuffed squid with rice	¥470
2	Beef over rice	¥1,000
3	Crabmeat Sushi	¥1,350
4	Original Crabmeat Sushi	¥920
5	Sea urchin eggs over rice	¥1,150
6	Crabmeat over rice	¥1,000
7	Octopus over rice in a pot	¥980
8	Cod over rice	¥1,020
9	Herring & herring roe over rice	¥800
10	Maezawa beef over rice	¥1,200



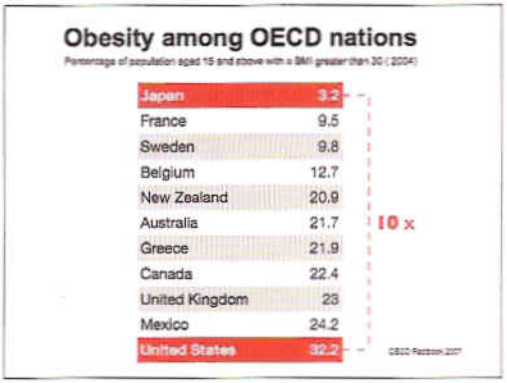
AFTER ▼





Top-10 selling "Ekiben" bentos

		Price (¥)
1	Stuffed squid with rice	470
2	Beef over rice	1,000
3	Crabmeat Sushi	1,350
4	Original Crabmeat Sushi	920
5	Sea urchin eggs over rice	1,150
6	Crabmeat over rice	1,000
7	Octopus over rice in a pot	980
8	Cod over rice	1,020
9	Herring & herring roe over rice	800
10	Maezawa beef over rice	1,200



Obesity among OECD nations

Percentage of population aged 15 and above with a BMI greater than 30 (2004)

Japan	3.2
France	9.5
Sweden	9.8
Belgium	12.7
New Zealand	20.9
Australia	21.7
Greece	21.9
Canada	22.4
United Kingdom	23
Mexico	24.2
United States	32.2

10 x

OECD Factbook 2007

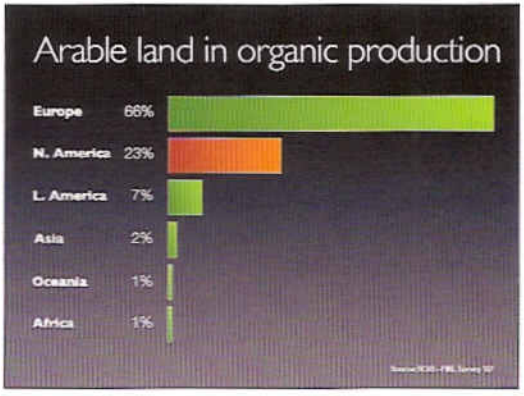
But Is the Nonessential Always "Noise"?

It is generally true that unnecessary elements decrease the design's efficiency and increase the possibility of unintended consequences. But does this mean that we must be uncompromising and remove everything that is not absolutely "essential" to a design? There are those who say a minimalist approach is the most efficient. But efficiency itself is not necessarily an absolute good or always the ideal approach.

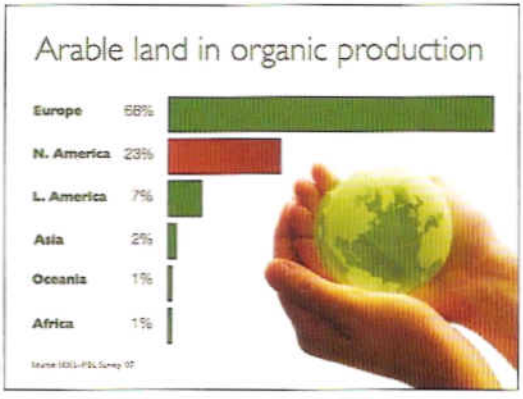
When it comes to the display of quantitative information (charts, tables, graphs, etc.), I strongly favor display designs that include the highest SNR possible without any adornment. I use a lot of photographic images in my presentations, so when I do show a chart or a graph, I do not usually place any other elements on the slide. There is nothing wrong with placing a bar chart, for example, over a background image (so long as there is proper contrast or salience), but I think the data itself (with a high SNR) can be a very powerful, memorable graphic on its own.

With other visuals, however, you may want to consider including or retaining elements that serve to support the message at a more emotional level. This may seem like a contradiction with aiming for a high SNR, or the idea that "less is more." However, often emotional elements matter (sometimes a lot). Clarity should be your guiding principle. As with all things, balance is important and the use of emotional elements depends on your particular circumstance, audience, and objectives. In the end, SNR is one principle among many to consider when creating visual messages.

ABOVE *The top slide is simple. The last three slides have "nonessential elements" added that make the slide more interesting, but do not necessarily increase clarity. Any of the designs may be appropriate, however, depending on the situation.*



A simple bar chart without the use of an image.

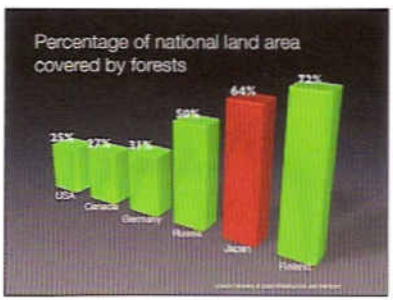


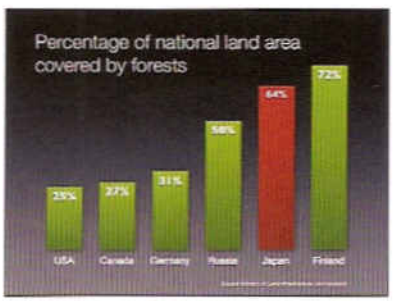
The same simple data with an image added. The image complements the underlining theme —save the planet— without getting in the way of the chart. (Embedded background images on this page and opposite page from iStockphoto.com.)

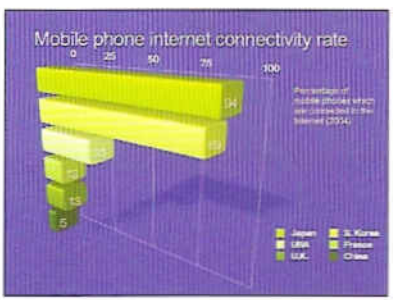
2-D or Not 2-D? (That Is the Question)

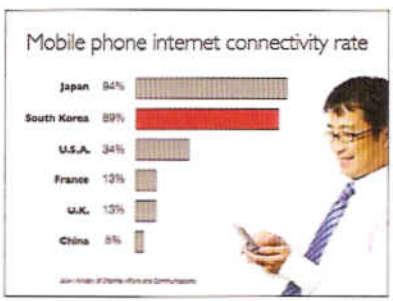
Many of the design tools in Keynote or PowerPoint are quite useful, but the 3-D tool, is one I could do very well without. Taking 2-D data and creating a 3-D chart does not simplify it. The idea is that 3-D may add emotion, but when it comes to charts and graphs, you should aim for simple, clean, and 2-D (for 2-D data). In *The Zen of Creativity* (Ballantine Books), author John Daido Loori, commenting on simplicity, says that the Zen aesthetic "...reflects a simplicity that allows our attention to be drawn to that which is essential, stripping away the extra." What is essential and what is extra is up to you to decide, but stripping away the extra ink that 3-D charts introduce seems like a good place to start. A 3-D representation of 2-D data increases what Edward Tufte calls the "ratio of ink-to-data." While it's nice to have a choice perhaps, 2-D charts and graphs will almost always be a better solution. Three-dimensional charts appear less accurate and can be difficult to comprehend. The viewing angle of the 3-D charts often makes it hard to see where data points sit on an axis. If you do use 3-D charts, avoid extreme perspectives.

The slides below on the left are examples of 3-D effects that compromise the display of very simple data. The slides on the right are possible improvements.









Who Says Your Logo Should Be on Every Slide?

"Branding" is one of the most overused and misunderstood terms in use today. Many people confuse the myriad elements of brand identity with brand or branding. The meaning of brand and branding goes far deeper than simply making one's logo as recognizable as possible. If you are presenting for an organization, try removing logos from all except the first and last slide. If you want people to learn something and remember you, then make a good, honest presentation. The logo won't help make a sell or make a point, but the clutter it brings does add unnecessary noise and makes the presentation visuals look like a commercial. We don't begin every new sentence in a conversation by restating our name, so why should you bombard people with your company logo on every slide?

Most companies with a PowerPoint template certainly insist that their employees use the company logo on every slide. But is this good advice? Slide real estate is limited as it is, so don't clutter it with logos and trademarks, footers, and so on.

Here's some good advice:

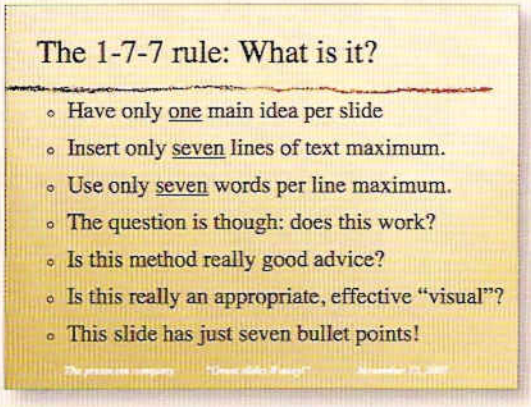
> *"[I]f you want people to understand better, then get that stuff off the screen... Clean it up and get it off because it is simply making it more difficult for people to understand what [you are] saying."*

These are the words of Tom Grimes, Kansas State University Journalism professor, speaking about his research on the influence of on-screen clutter on understanding or retention. He's actually talking about the overpowering visual clutter found in TV newscasts, yet his advice is good for our live multimedia presentations as well. Over the past several years, many TV news broadcasts have substituted "pizzazz" and "sizzle"—not to mention conjecture, speculation, and sensationalism—for clean, clear messages. Perhaps the visual clutter found in most TV news broadcasts has spilled over into the corporate slide templates. One thing is for certain: if you want people to hear and understand your visual message, the answer is not to add more clutter but to remove it all.

A Word About Bullet Points

The "traditional way" of doing presentations with slides full of bulleted lists has been going on for so long it is in a sense part of corporate culture. It is simply "the way things are done." Here in Japan, for example, young employees entering the company will be taught, at some point, that when they do presentations with slideware they should put a minimum amount of text in each slide. This sounds like good advice, right? But, a "minimum" means something like six–seven lines of abbreviated text and figures and several complete sentences. The idea of having one or two words (or—gasp!—no words) would be a sign of someone who did not do their homework. A series of text-filled slides with plenty of charts or tables shows that you are a "serious employee." Never mind that the audience can't really see the detail in the slides well (or that the executive board does not really understand your charts). If it looks complicated it must be "good."

I have a shelf full of presentation books in English and Japanese. All of them say "use a minimum of text." Most of them define "minimum" as being anywhere from five to eight lines of bullet points. The "1-7-7 Rule" is advice often given to presenters (proof that conventional wisdom is out of sync). Here's the rub: no one can do a good presentation with slide after slide of bullet points. No one. Bullet points work well when used sparingly in documents to help readers scan content or to summarize key points and so on. But bullet points are usually not effective in a live talk.



How Many Bullets Points per Slide?

A good general guideline is to use bullet points only very rarely and only after you have considered other options for displaying the information in a way that best supports your point visually. Do not let the default bulleted lists of the software template dictate your decision. Sometimes bullet points may be the best choice. For example, if you are summarizing key specifications of a new product or reviewing the steps in a process, a clear bulleted list may be appropriate depending on your content, objectives, and audience. People will tire quickly, however, if several slides of bulleted lists are shown one after another, so use them with caution. I am not suggesting that you completely abandon the idea of using bullet points in multimedia presentations, but use of bullet points in slides should be a rare exception.

TOP *The blue slide above was my first attempt to summarize the key points from Dan Pink's book* A Whole New Mind *in one slide.*

BOTTOM *The second slide above uses about half the text to summarize the key points in a more engaging, visual way.*

Picture Superiority Effect

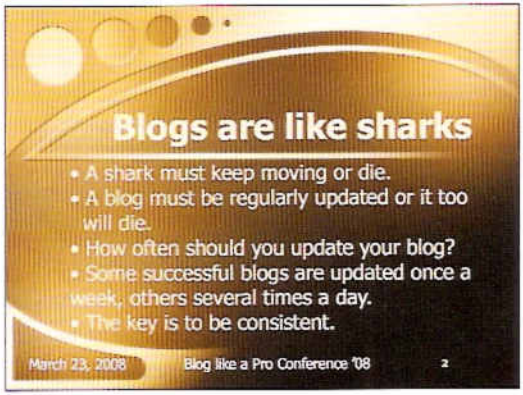
The picture superiority effect says that pictures are remembered better than words, especially when people are casually exposed to the information and the exposure is for a very limited time. When information recall is measured just after exposure to a series of pictures or a series of words, the recall for pictures and words is about equal. However, the picture superiority effect applies when the time after exposure is more than 30 seconds, according to research cited in *Universal Principles of Design* (Rockport Publishers). "Use the picture superiority effect to improve the recognition and recall of key information. Use pictures and words together, and ensure that they reinforce the same information for optimal effect," say the authors Lidwell, Holden, and Butler. The effect is strongest when the pictures represent common, concrete things.

You can see the picture superiority effect used widely in marketing communications, such as posters, billboards, brochures, annual reports, etc. The effect should be kept in mind too when designing slides (images and text) that support a narrative. Visual imagery appears to be a powerful mnemonic tool that helps learning and increases retention compared, say, to witnessing someone read words off a screen.

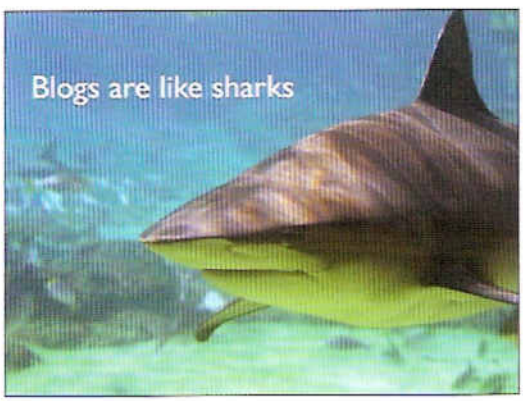
Going Visual

Images are a powerful and natural way for humans to communicate. The key word here is natural. We are hardwired for understanding images and using images to communicate. There seems to be something inside of us—even from a very young age—that yearns to draw or otherwise show the ideas in our head through imagery (drawings, paintings, photography, etc.).

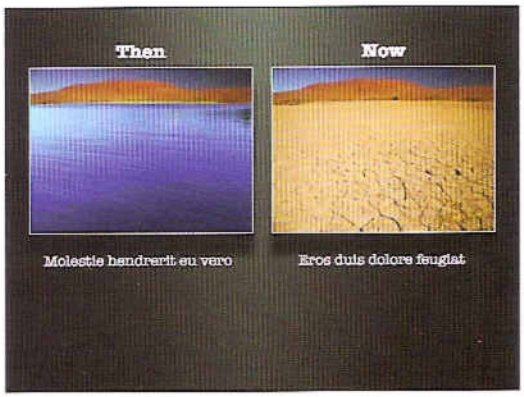
In 2005, Alexis Gerard and Bob Goldstein published *Going Visual: Using Images to Enhance Productivity, Decision-Making and Profits* (Wiley). Gerard and Goldstein urge us to use visuals to tell our story or prove our point. The authors are not talking about using imaging technology because it is "cool" or "modern." Going visual is about using images to improve communication and business. For example, you could write about or talk about how a recent fire impacted production, but wouldn't it be far more powerful to send pictures with a smaller amount of text (or spoken words) to describe the situation? What would be more memorable? Which would have more impact?



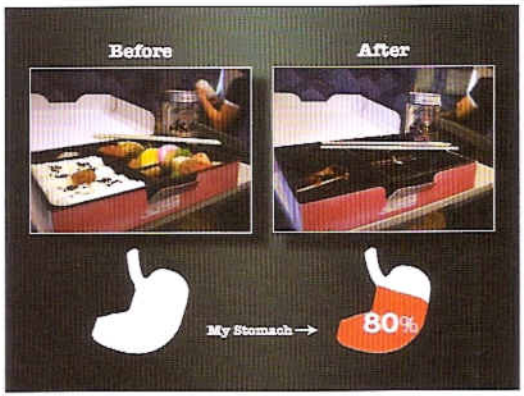
A traditional slide which duplicates the presenter's words. More of a reading test than a visual.



This slide serves to enhance the presenter's spoken words much better. The photo has impact and the point is made clearly. Which slide is more memorable? And since people are not reading, they can actually listen to you. (Photo of shark from iStockphoto.com.)



Using images is an efficient way to compare and contrast changes such as the effects of drought in this simulated example. (The original embedded image of the dry lake bed from iStockphoto.com.)



This is a tongue-in-cheek example showing the actual bento I mentioned in Chapter 1 that was the genesis for this book. "Before/after" and "then and now" visual comparisons are easy to create and easy to remember. Al Gore used many "then and now" visual comparisons in his presentations and in the movie Inconvenient Truth to show physical changes over time.

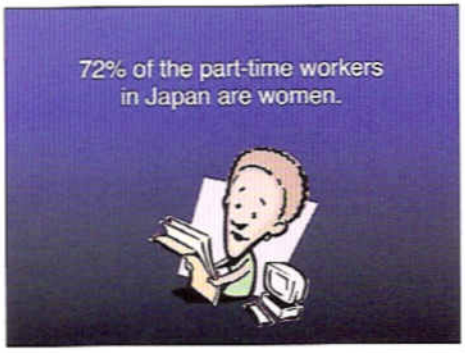
Ask yourself this: What information are you representing with the written word on a slide that you could replace with a photograph (or other appropriate image or graphic)? You still need text for labeling, etc. But if you are using text on a slide for describing something, you probably could use an image instead more effectively.

Images are powerful, efficient, and direct. Images can also be used very effectively as mnemonic devices to make messages more memorable. If people cannot listen and read at the same time, why do most PowerPoint slides contain far more words than images? One reason, historically, is that business people have been limited by technology. Visual communication and technology go hand in hand. In 2008, however, most people do have the basic tools available—for example, digital cameras and editing software—for easily placing photos in slides.

No more excuses. It just takes a different way of looking at presentations. It takes the realization that modern presentations with slides and other multimedia have more in common with cinema (images and narration) and comics (images and text) than they do with written documents. Today's presentations increasingly share more in common with a documentary film than an overhead transparency.

On the following pages you can see a few slides demonstrating different visual treatments in support of a single message. The context is a presentation on gender and labor issues in Japan. The purpose of the slide was to support visually the claim that "72% of the part-time workers in Japan are women." This statistic is from the Japanese Ministry of Labor. The figure "72%" is something the presenter said she wanted the audience to remember as it was discussed again as the presentation progressed. So we designed a slide that was subtle, simple, memorable, and fit into a theme that was appealing and attractive.

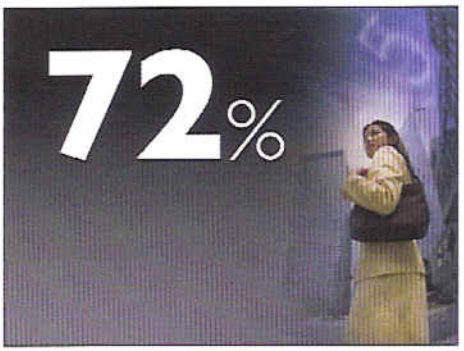
This is the original slide. The problem with this slide is that the clip art used does not reinforce the simple statistic, nor does it even fit the theme of women in the Japanese labor market. The background is a tired, overused PowerPoint template, and the text is difficult to read.



The text on this slide is easy to read, and although the clip art is a bit more appropriate for the subject, it still does not give the slide a strong visual impact or overall professional look and feel.

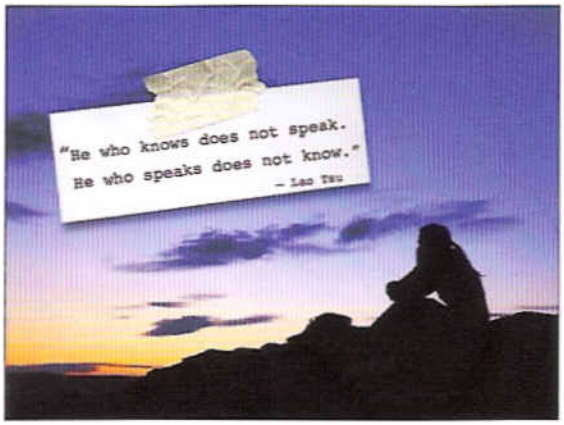
This slide is an effort to display the same information in a pie chart. While this type of chart is not unusual, its 3-D effects and extra lines are not an improvement.

The two bullet points are easy to read in an instant. The photo of an actual part-time female worker in Japan is a step in the right direction, but it could still be much better.

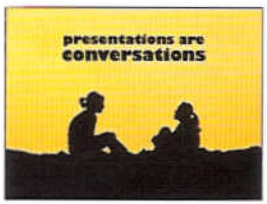


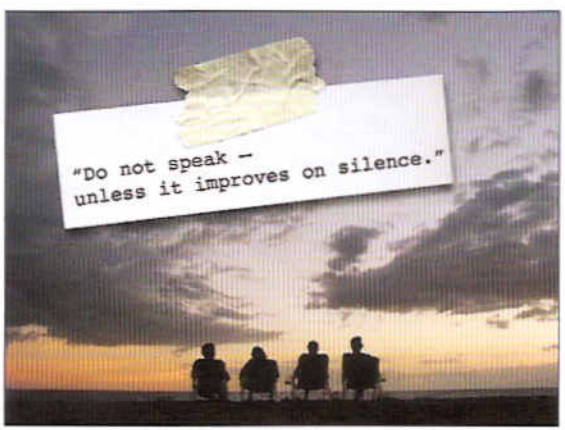
ABOVE *The four slides above are different treatments of the same message. Any of these slides would also work to complement the presenter's narration. (Notice that the slides featuring only the "72%" figure would be virtually meaningless without the presenter's narration.)*

BELOW *The slide on the left was the redesign that was used in the end. All the remaining slides in the deck were also redesigned using Japanese stock images giving the entire presentation a consistent visual theme that supported the presenter's words.*



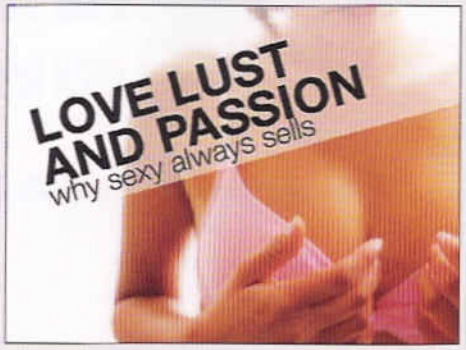
All slides on this page use images that "bleed" off the edge, filling the entire screen. Text and image work in harmony. The "masking tape and paper note" is a jpeg image from iStockphoto that provides an interesting effect and prevents the text from getting lost in the background. The masking tape and note element provide good contrast with the text and add depth to the overall visual. The slight angle of the note and text add interest without being distracting.

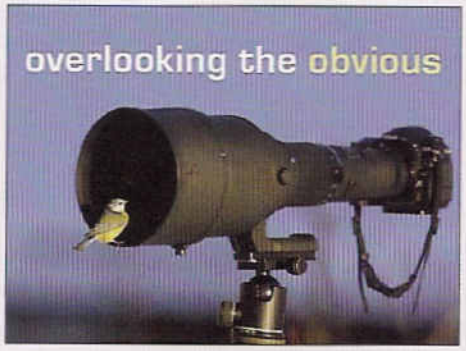




Slide images on this page from iStockphoto.com.

The slides on this page are from the portfolio of Jeff Brenman, the creator of Apollo Ideas and the winner of SlideShare's "World's Best Presentation Contest" in 2007. (You can see the slide deck that won him first place in the next chapter.) Jeff has a talent for combining images and text in a way that is fresh and effective for augmenting the presenter's messages.





Where Can You Get Good Images?

Getty Images may have the best quality and the greatest selection of images for presentations, but what if you cannot afford to make a slide presentation costing hundreds or thousands of dollars in stock image fees? In this case, low cost, royalty-free "micro-stock" images are an alternative. The site I recommend most often is iStockphoto.com. Most of the images used in this book are from iStockphoto.com. iStockphoto is incredibly easy to use and after you search you can just roll over thumbs to get a larger view without having to open another page.

I do not suggest you limit your image searches to iStockphoto.com only. I have a shelf full of photo CDs and subscribe to other photo sites as well, but iStockphoto is the best. They have over two million images from which to choose and are adding thousands of images every week; they just keep getting better and better. iStockphoto has a "free image of the week" so you may want to check back from time to time to see what's new (and free). At the back of this book, you will find a special code just for you that entitles you to 10 free credits on the iStockphoto Web site (and a discount for current members). So take your free credits and download a few images from iStockphoto.com.

My personal favorite photo site
- iStockphoto (www.istockphoto.com)

Here are some other places to get low-cost images
- Dreams Time (www.dreamstime.com)
- Fotolia (www.fotolia.com)
- Japanese Streets (www.japanesestreets.com)
- Shutter Stock (www.shutterstock.com)
- Shutter Map (www.shuttermap.com)

Here are a few sites that offer free images
- Morgue File (www.morguefile.com)
- Flickr Creative Commons Pool (www.flickr.com/creativecommons)
- Image After (www.imageafter.com)
- Stock.xchng (www.sxc.hu)
- Everystockphoto search engine (www.everystockphoto.com)

Quote This

While long bullet points are not very effective as a "visual enhancer," displaying quotations in your presentation slides can be a very powerful technique. Depending on the presentation, I often use quite a few quotes from various fields to support my points. The trick is not to use them too much and to make sure they are short and legible.

When I first saw Tom Peters live a few years ago while I was working in Silicon Valley, I was happy to see that he used a good deal of quotes from various experts, authors, and industry leaders. Using quotes in his presentation visuals is a big deal for Tom. In fact, it is number 18 on his "Presentation Excellence 56" article on his Web site.

Commenting on why he uses so many PowerPoint slides containing quotes, Tom says:

> *"...my conclusions are much more credible when I back them up with Great Sources. I say pretty radical stuff. I say 'Get radical!' That's one thing. But then I show a quote from Jack Welch, who, after all, ran a $150 billion company (I didn't): 'You can't behave in a calm, rational manner; you've got to be out there on the lunatic fringe.' Suddenly my radicalism is "'certified" by a "real operator." Also, I find that people like to get beyond the spoken word, and see a SIMPLE reminder of what I'm saying."*

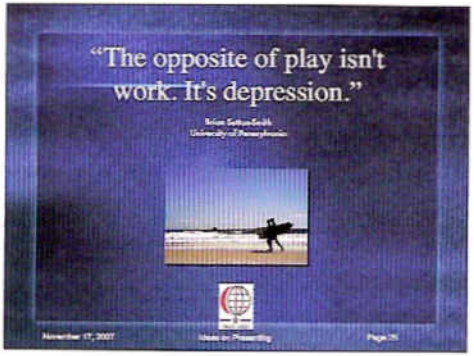
Quotes can indeed add credibility to your story. A simple quote is a good springboard from which you can launch your next topic or weave into your narrative to support your point. Remember, quotes should be short, in most cases, since it can become quite tedious when a presenter reads a paragraph from a screen.

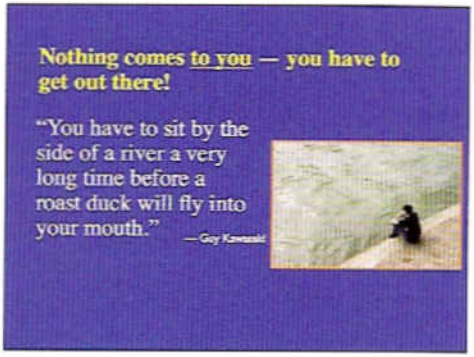
Text within Images

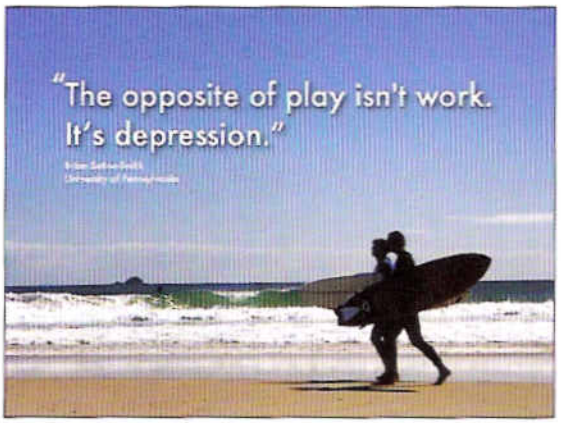
I almost always get my quotes straight from material I have read directly or from personal interviews. My books, for example, are filled with sticky-notes and pages full of my comments and highlighter marks. I sketch a star and write a note to myself next to great passages for future reference. It's kind of messy, but it works for me when I put the presentation together later.

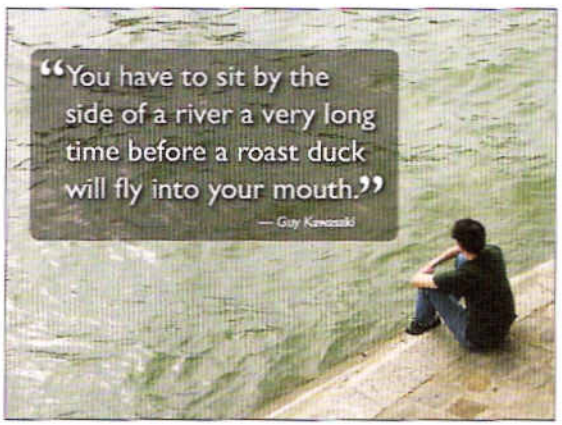
When I use a quote I sometimes use a graphic element that targets people's emotions, ads more visual interest, and enhances the effect of the slide. But rather than using a small photo or other element, consider placing the text within a larger photo. To do this you will want to use an image at least as large as your slide dimensions (e.g., 800x600) for your background. Look for an image that supports the point you are making with the quotation. The image should have plenty of empty space so that your text can fit comfortably in the slide with good contrast.

On this page you can see two slides displaying a quotation in a manner that is not unusual. On the opposite page you can see the same quote displayed *within* the image rather than simply next to a smaller version of the image in a slide. *(Photos in these slides from iStockphoto.com.)*






"The opposite of play isn't work.
It's depression."


"You have to sit by the side of a river a very long time before a roast duck will fly into your mouth."
— Guy Kawasaki

Empty Space

Empty space (also called negative space or white space) is a concept that is supremely simple, yet the most difficult for people to apply. Whether people are designing a document or a slide, the urge to fill empty areas with more elements is just too great. One of the biggest mistakes that typical business people make with presentation slides (and documents as well) is going out of their way to seemingly use every centimeter of space on a page, filling it up with text, boxes, clip art, charts, footers, and the ubiquitous company logo.

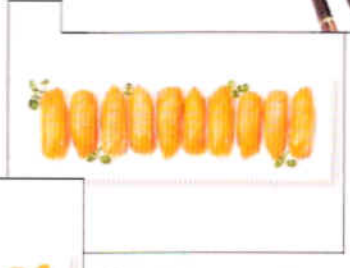
Empty space implies elegance and clarity. This is true with graphic design, but you can see the importance of space (both visual and physical) in the context of, say, interior design as well. High-end brand shops are always designed to create as much open space as possible. Empty space can convey a feeling of high quality, sophistication, and importance.

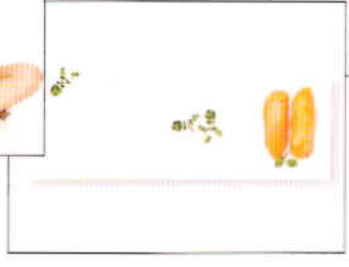
Empty space has a purpose. But those new to design may only see the positive elements, such as text or a graphic, without ever "seeing" the empty space and using that space to make the design more compelling. It is the empty space that gives a design air and lets the positive elements breathe. If it were true that empty space in a design such as a slide were "wasted space," then it would make sense to want to remove such waste. However, empty space in a design is not "nothing," it is indeed a powerful "something," which gives the few elements on your slide their power.

In the Zen arts, you will find an appreciation for empty space. A painting, for example, may be mostly "empty" except for two to three elements, but the placement of the elements within that space forms a powerful message. The same approach can be applied to a room. Many Japanese homes have a washitsu, a traditional room with tatami mats, which is simple and mostly empty. The empty space allows for the appreciation of a single item, such as a single flower or a single wall hanging. The emptiness is a powerful design element itself. In this case, the more we add, the more diluted and less effective the design of our graphic, or living space, becomes.

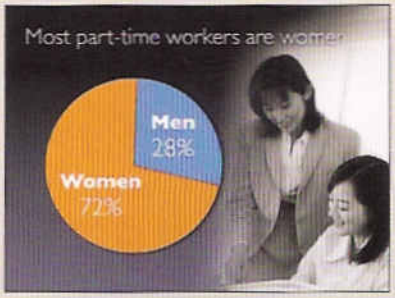
Using Empty Space

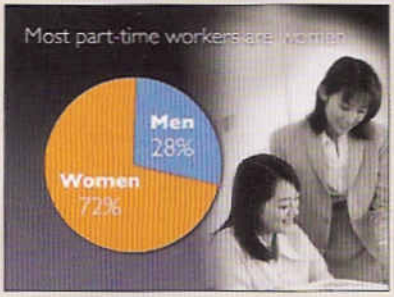
The blue slide on top is a typical one with several bullet points and an image related to the topic. Rather than making good use of empty space, the blue slide has trapped space in areas around the image. Instead of using one busy slide, I broke the flow of the content into six slides for the introduction of the "Hara hachi bu" concept. Since it is not necessary to put all the words that are spoken by the presenter on the screen, much of the on-screen text was removed. The slides have a clean white background with plenty of active empty space that helps guide the viewer's eyes. When a new slide is revealed the eye will be naturally drawn to the image first (it's larger, colorful) and then quickly go to the text element.





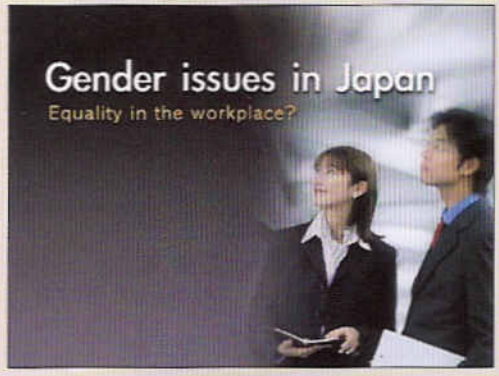
Embedded images on this page from iStockphoto.com





Directing the Eye With Images

Images can be used to help guide your viewer's eyes through a slide to the most important elements. If you use images of people, be careful not to have these images unintentionally guide your viewer's eyes away from what you want them to see. For example, if the text element (or chart) is the highest priority, it is important not to have images of people looking in the opposite direction from those elements. How do the images in these slides guide your eyes toward or away from the other elements? Which versions of the slides on this page look more harmonious?



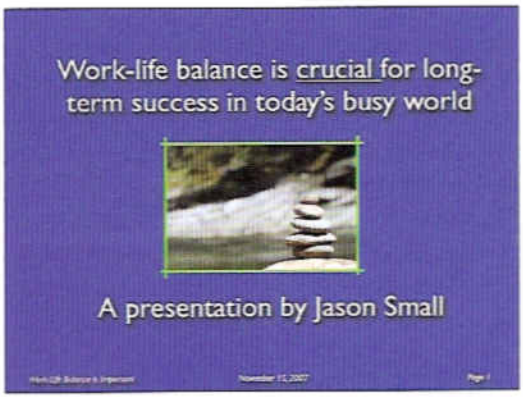
Balance

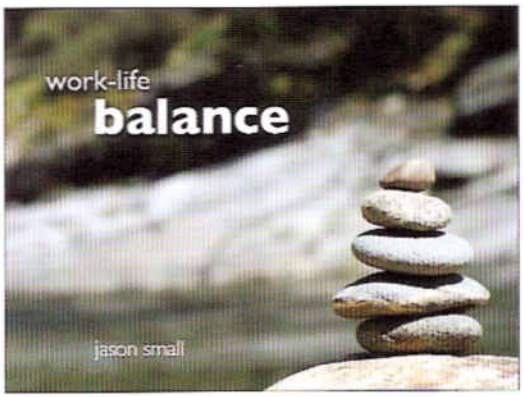
Balance in a design is important, and one way to achieve good balance and clarity with a design is through the intelligent use of "empty space." A well-balanced design has a clear, single, unified message. A well-designed slide has a clear starting point and guides the viewer through the design. The viewer should never have to "think" about where to look. A visual must never confuse anyone. What is the most important, less important, and least important parts of the design can be clearly expressed by having a clear hierarchy and a good balance of the display elements.

Empty space can be dynamic and active through careful placement of positive elements. Conscious use of empty space can even bring motion to your design. In this way, the empty space is not passive but active. If you want to bring a more dynamic feel and interest to your slide design, then consider using an asymmetrical design. Asymmetrical designs activate empty space and make your design more interesting. Asymmetrical designs are more informal and are dynamic, with a variety of sizes and shapes.

Symmetrical designs have a strong emphasis along a central vertical axis. Symmetrical balance is vertically centered and is equivalent on both sides. Symmetrical designs are more static than asymmetrical designs and evoke feelings of formality or stability. There is nothing wrong with centered, symmetrical designs, although empty space in such designs is generally passive and pushed to the side.

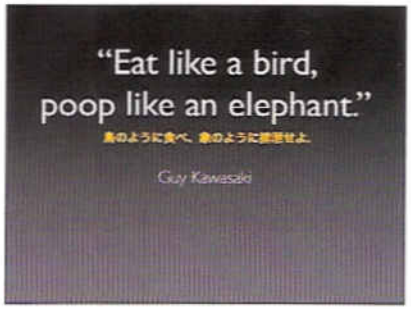
Design is about seeing and manipulating shapes, but if we do not see the empty space in a slide as a shape, then it will be ignored and any use of empty space will be accidental. Consequently, the results will not be as powerful. Good presentations will incorporate a series of presentation visuals that have a mix of slides that are symmetrical and asymmetrical.

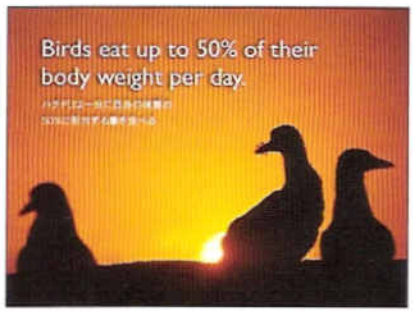


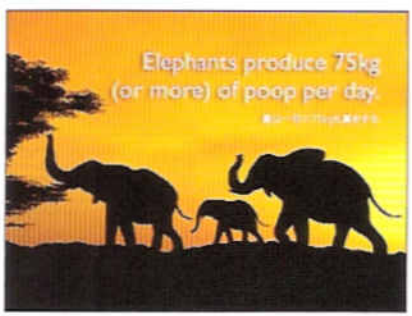


Both slides have good balance. The top slide is a common design that is symmetrical (and not very interesting). The bottom slide is asymmetrical and is simpler yet more powerful as a visual. (Image from iStockphoto.com.)

One way to activate the empty space and create a dynamic, asymmetrical slide is to use large images that "bleed" off the edge. Use the empty space to place small amounts of text or other elements. On the right is another Guy Kawasaki quote—one of my favorites—from one of my branding talks in Japan. The first slide (the quote) is symmetrical. The other two slides are examples of asymmetrical designs.





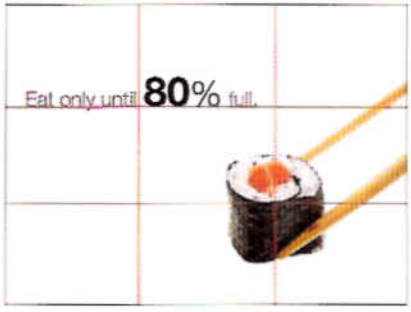


Embedded images above from iStockphoto.com

Grids and the Rule of Thirds

For centuries, artists and designers have introduced a proportion called the "golden mean" or "golden ratio" found in nature into their works. The golden section rectangle has a proportion of 1:1.618. There is a belief that we are naturally drawn to images that have proportions approaching the golden section rectangle, just as we are often drawn to many things in the natural environment with golden-mean proportions. However, attempting to design visuals according to golden-mean proportions is impractical in most cases. But, the "rule of thirds," which is derived from the golden mean, is a basic design technique that can help you add balance (symmetrical or asymmetrical), beauty, and a higher aesthetic quality to your visuals.

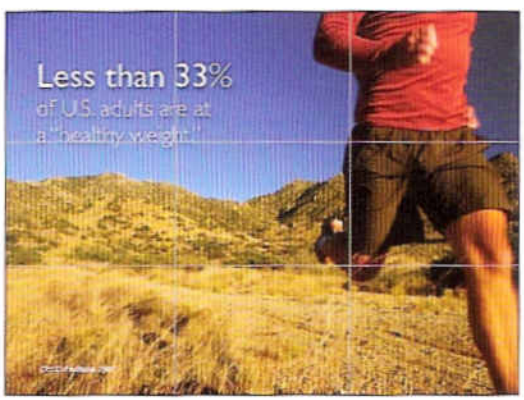
The rule of thirds is a basic technique that photographers learn for framing their shots. Subjects placed exactly in the middle can often make for an uninteresting photo. A viewfinder can be divided by lines—real or just imagined—so that you have four intersecting lines or crossing points and nine boxes that resemble a tic-tac-toe board. These four crossing points (also called "power points," if you can believe it) are areas you might place your main subject, rather than in the center.

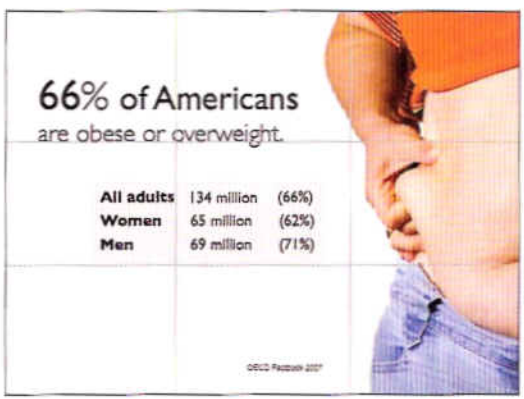


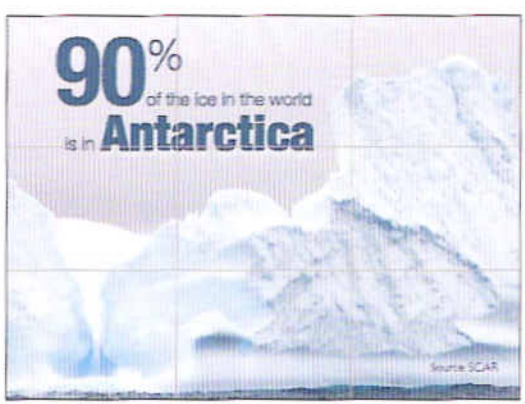
Remember, there is no liberty in "absolute freedom" when it comes to design. You need to limit your choices so that you do not waste time adjusting every single design element to a new position. I recommend that you create some sort of clean, simple grid to build your visuals upon. Although you may not be aware of it, virtually every Web page and every page in a book or magazine is built atop a grid. Grids can save you time and ensure that your design elements fit more harmoniously on the display. Using grids to divide your slide "canvas" into thirds, for example, is an easier way to at least approach golden-mean proportions, and you can use the grids to align elements that give the overall design balance, a clear flow and point of focus, and a natural overall cohesiveness and aesthetic quality that is not accidental but is by design.

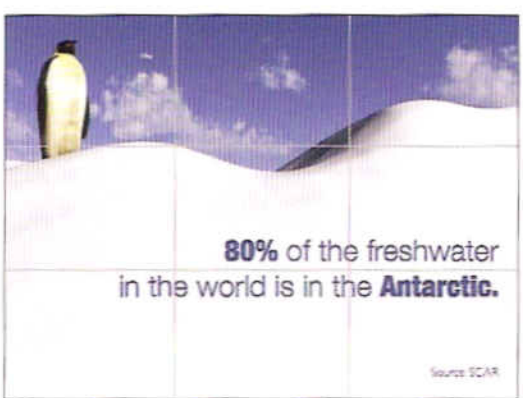
On this page you can see five samples of simple slides in which elements were arranged with the help of the "rule of thirds" grid (you can easily create your own using the guides in Keynote or PowerPoint). The rule of thirds is not a rule at all, it is only a guideline. But it is a very useful guideline to use when you are aiming to achieve a balanced look.

You'll also notice that the images themselves have pretty good "rule of third" proportions. The iStockphoto images were chosen in part based on the photo's proportions and how the image guided the eye and contained empty space for text or other design elements. (Images used for the slides on this page are from iStockphoto.com.)









The Big Four: Contrast, Repetition, Alignment, Proximity

These four principles are not all there is to know about graphic design, but understanding these simple related concepts and applying them to slide design can make for far more satisfying and effective designs.

Contrast

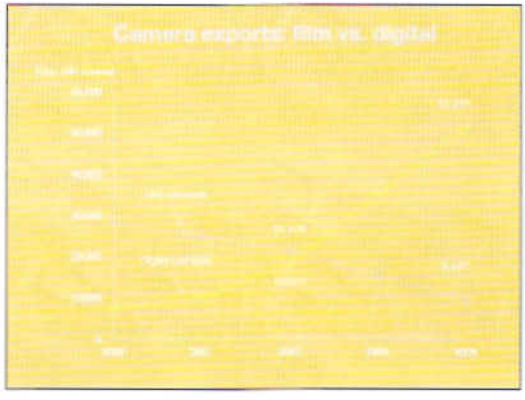
Contrast simply means difference. And for whatever reason—perhaps our brains think they are still back in the savannah scanning for wild predators—we are all wired to notice differences. We are not conscious of it, but we are scanning and looking for similarities and differences all the time. Contrast is what we notice, and it's what gives a design its energy. So you should make elements that are not the same clearly different, not just slightly different.

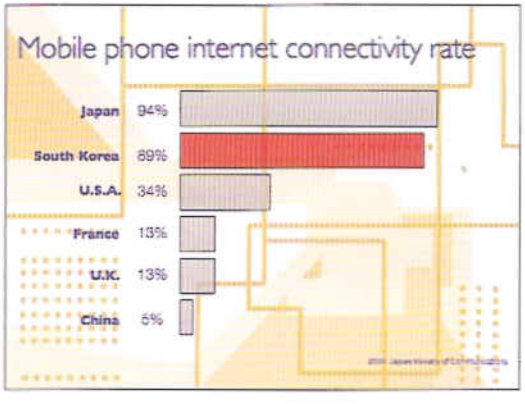
Contrast is one of the most powerful design concepts of them all because really any design element can be contrasted with another. You can achieve contrast in many ways—for example, through the manipulation of space (near and far, empty and filled), through color choices (dark and light, cool and warm), by text selection (serif and sans serif, bold and narrow), by positioning of elements (top and bottom, isolated and grouped), and so on.

Making use of contrast can help you create a design in which one item is clearly dominant. This helps the viewer "get" the point of your design quickly. Every good design has a strong and clear focal point and having a clear contrast among elements (with one being clearly dominant) helps. If all items in a design are of equal or similar weight with weak contrast and with nothing being clearly dominant, it is difficult for the viewer to know where to begin. Designs with strong contrast attract interest, and help the viewer make sense of the visual. Weak contrast is not only boring, but it can be confusing.

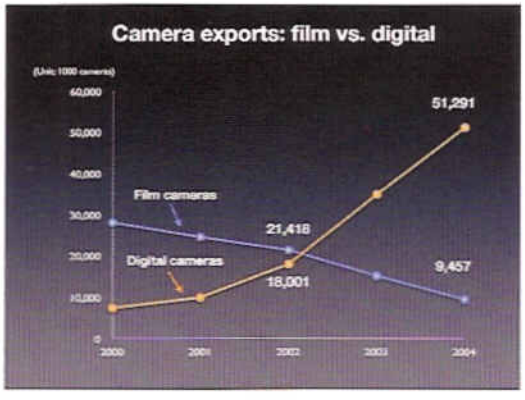
Every single element of a design such as line, shape, color, texture, size, space, type, and so on can be manipulated to create contrast. On the next page are some slides that make good use of contrast compared with slides that have weaker contrast.

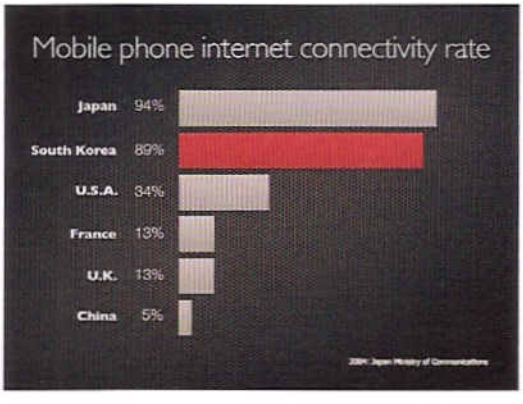
WEAK CONTRAST





BETTER CONTRAST



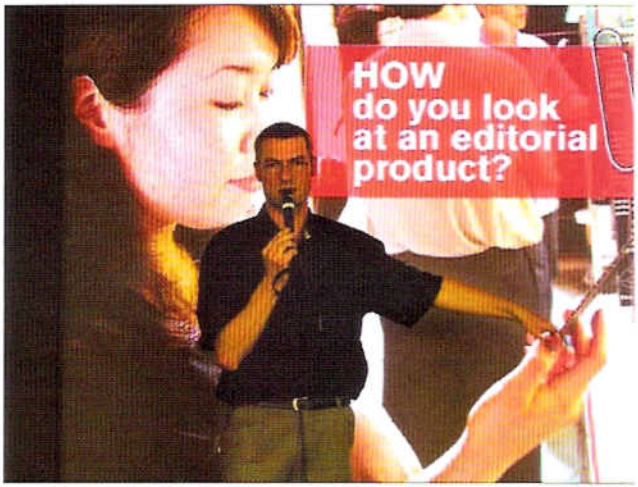


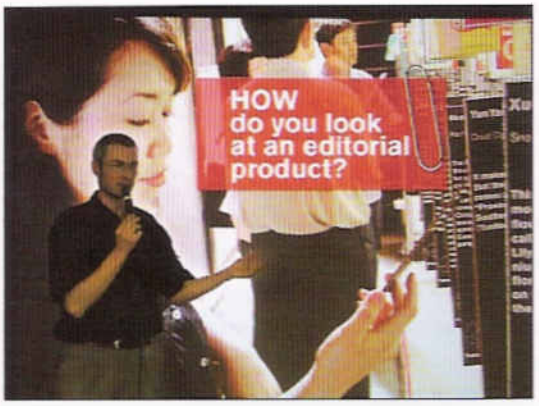
Repetition

The principle of repetition simply means the reusing of the same or similar elements throughout your design. Repetition of certain design elements in a slide or among a deck of slides will bring a clear sense of unity, consistency, and cohesiveness. Where contrast is about showing differences, repetition is about subtly using elements to make sure the design is viewed as being part of a larger whole. If you use a stock template from your software application, then repetition is already built into your slides. For example, a consistent background and consistent use of type adds unity across a deck of slides.

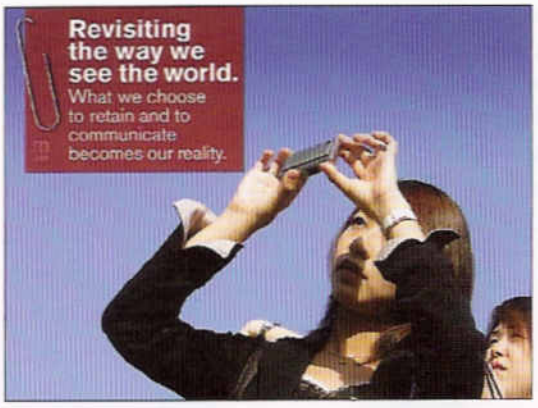
However, you must be careful not to have too much repetition among your slides. Most of the built-in templates have been seen many times before and may not suit your unique situation. Many of the standard templates also have background elements that will soon become tiring, rather than generating interest the tenth time a different slide is shown but with the same repetitive element. For example, a starfish in the lower right (not my favorite but perhaps appropriate for a presentation on marine biology) is an element that would be a stronger repetitive element if its size and location occasionally shifted in harmony with the content of different slides and in a way that was subtle and did not interfere with the primary message.

The slides on the next page are a good example of repetition. In these slides from a presentation on the process of designing a book, Swiss designer and photographer Markuz Wernli Saito used his own full bleed photos for all his slides. To help give the entire presentation a unified look, he used a similar red note and paperclip to "hold" his text in each slide. The placement of the note and paperclip image was not always in the same location in every slide, nor was the size always the same, but the consistent use of this one element and the red color served to ad a subtle repetitive element that gave his visuals a professional and unified look.




HOW
do you look
at an editorial
product?


DESIGN MATTERS — April, 2005
Presentation by Markuz Wernli Saitō
Welcome


Revisiting
the way we
see the world.
What we choose
to retain and to
communicate
becomes our reality.


Element of surprise


Designing
from inside out
INTERPRETATION


Integration
of text & image

Alignment

The whole point of the alignment principle is that nothing in your slide design should look as if it were placed there randomly. Every element is connected visually via an invisible line. Where repetition is more concerned with elements across a deck of slides, alignment is about obtaining unity among elements of a single slide. Even elements that are quite far apart on a slide should have a visual connection, something that is easier to achieve with the use of grids. When you place elements on a slide, try to align them with another element.

Many people fail to make an effort to apply the alignment principle, which often results in elements being almost aligned but not quite. This may not seem like a big deal, but these kinds of slides look less sophisticated and overall less professional. The audience may not be conscious of it, but slides that contain elements in alignment look cleaner. And assuming other principles are applied harmoniously as well, your slides should be easier to understand quickly.

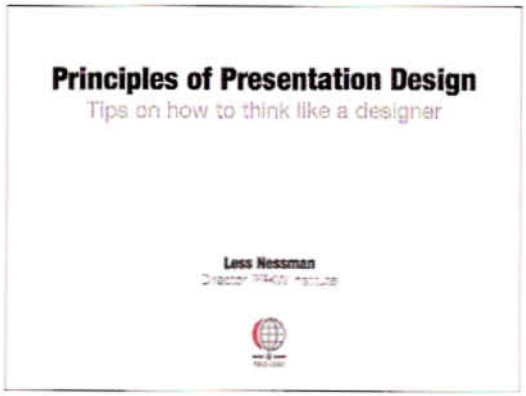
Proximity

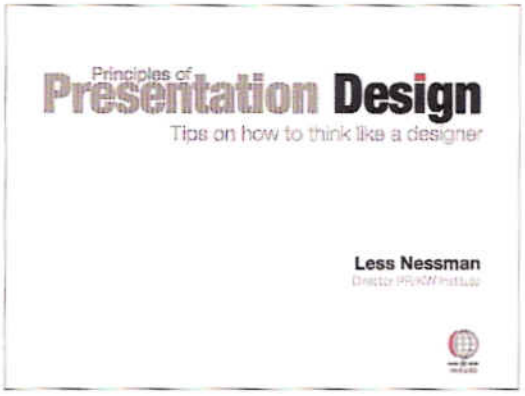
The principle of proximity is about moving things closer or farther apart to achieve a more organized look. The principle says that related items should be grouped together so that they will be viewed as a group, rather than as several unrelated elements. Audiences will assume that items that are not near each other in a design are not closely related. Audiences will naturally tend to group similar items that are near to each other into a single unit.

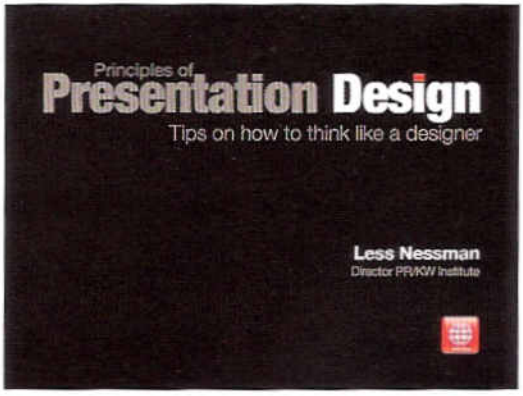
People should never have to "work" at trying to figure out which caption goes with which graphic or whether or not a line of text is a subtitle or a line of text unrelated to the title. Do not make audiences think. That is, do not make them "think" about the wrong stuff, like trying to decipher your slide's organization and design priority. A slide is not a page in a book or magazine, so you are not going to have more than a few elements or groups of elements. Robin Williams, in her best-selling book *The Non-Designer's Design Book* (Peachpit Press) says that we must be conscious of where our eye goes first when we step back and look at our design. When you look at your slide, notice where your eye is drawn first, second, and so on. What path does your eye take?

This title slide lacks a design priority. Due to poor use of alignment and proximity the slide seems to contain five different elements.

This slide uses symmetrical balance and better proximity, with related items now clearly together. Greater contrast is also achieved by adjusting type size and color to give the design a clear priority.

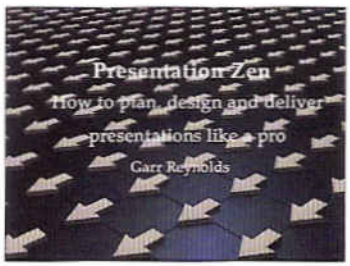


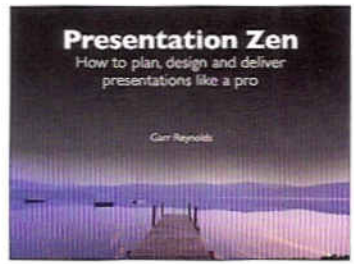




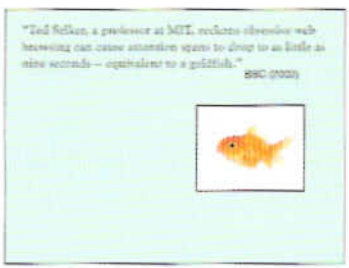
The two slides on this page show that by aligning all elements flush right, a strong invisible line is created on the right side that ties all elements together in a way that is more interesting than the more common symmetrical title. Type and color are adjusted to create greater contrast and interest. The red dot in the title ties in with the red logo at the bottom.

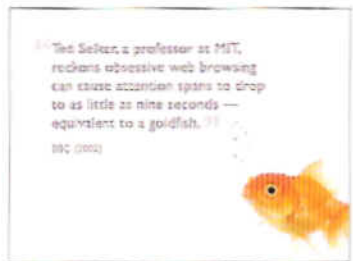
The slide on the left looks busier due to the abrupt contrast between the background color of the images. By aligning the text and the photos and making the image backgrounds transparent (in this case by simply changing the slide background to white) the slide is much cleaner and "noise" is reduced.



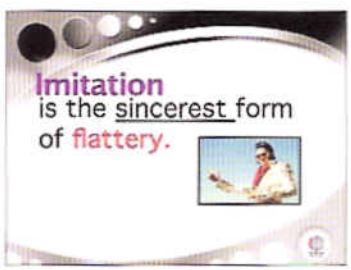


The background image on the slide on the left has too much salience, making the title hard to see. Choosing a more appropriate background image that allows the text to remain clearly in the foreground and grouping the text lines makes for a stronger title slide.





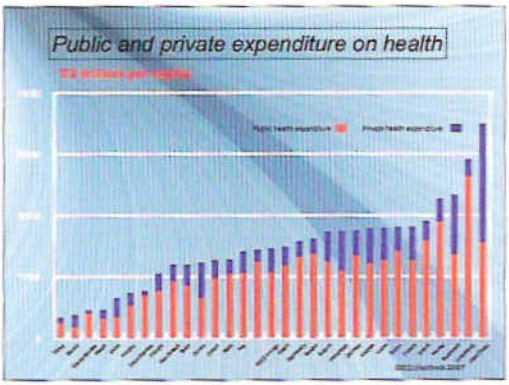
By making the background of the fish photo seem transparent (again by changing the slide background color in this case) the image and text blend together harmoniously into a more unified visual.



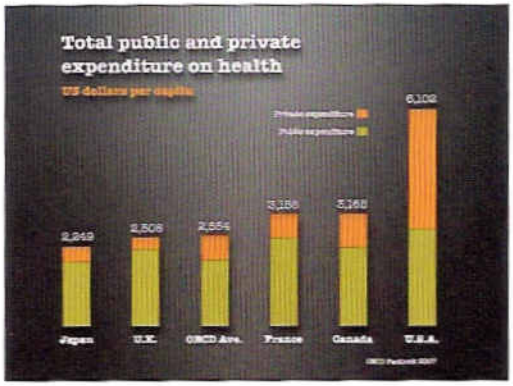
The slide on the left has a busy template which makes the useful area of the slide about 1/3 smaller. The slide on the right uses the image to cover the entire slide. The text is clearly foreground and the image serves both as background and at times foreground, making the overall visual more dynamic and more unified with a cleaner, more dramatic look.

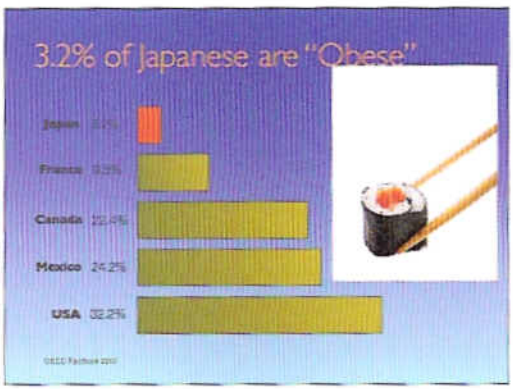
Images on this page and opposite page from iStockphoto.com.

This slide features a typical graph exported from Excel. It is impossible to identify the countries as the text is too small and at an angle. The biggest problem is this is too much data for a display. This amount of information would be better presented in a handout.

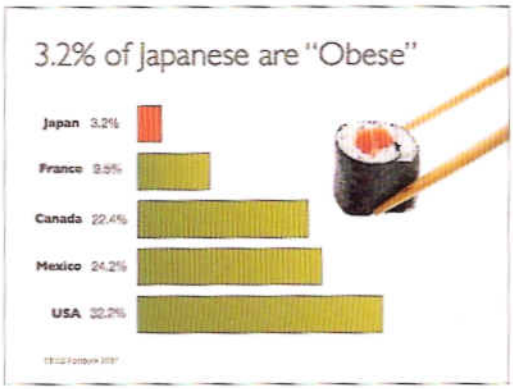


The text and data are easier to see as the contrast between the foreground and background is much better. Only the key variables are chosen to include in the display, which allows the bars and figures to be larger. Information on the excluded variables can be put into a document to be taken away.





The background color is not a good fit with the colors of the bars nor does it provide enough contrast; the text is hard to read. The background of the sushi photo adds unnecessary noise to the visual.



Here the background of the sushi photo "disappears" to match the white background of the slide. The text and bars and background have much better contrast and are easier to read.

The more strikingly visual your presentation is, the more people will remember it. And more importantly, they will remember you.

— Paul Arden

In Sum

- Design matters. But design is not about decoration or about ornamentation. Design is about making communication as easy and clear for the viewer as possible.
- Keep the principle of signal-versus-noise in mind to remove all nonessential elements. Remove visual clutter. Avoid 3-D effects.
- People remember visuals better than bullet points. Always ask yourself how you can use a strong visual—including quantitative displays—to enhance your narrative.
- Empty space is not nothing; it is a powerful something. Learn to see and manipulate empty space to give your slide designs greater organization, clarity, and interest.
- Use the principle of contrast to create strong dynamic differences among elements that are different. If it is different, make it *very* different.
- Use the principle of repetition to repeat selected elements throughout your slides. This can help give your slides unity and organization.
- Use the principle of alignment to connect elements visually (through invisible lines) on a slide. Grids are very useful for achieving good alignment. This will give your slide a clean, well-organized look.
- Use the principle of proximity to ensure that related items are grouped together. People will tend to interpret items together or near to each other as belonging to the same group.