THE TECHNICAL TALK
MORE EFFECTIVE USE OF VISUAL AIDS

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ABSTRACT

While most technical writing teachers assign the oral report and insist on visuals, very few offer their students good classroom examples of technical report visual aids. However, a set of 35 mm slides on one teaching topic could be easily produced with neither expensive equipment nor much ability in graphic design.

INTRODUCTION

This past summer I attended a summer seminar for technical writing teachers at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute. Most of the presentations were good, but one factor separated the good from the excellent speakers: the latter group had interesting visuals to accompany their talks. Not until that seminar did I realize my classroom failure to demonstrate this need to my students. I knew that the overhead projector and chalkboard that I commonly used had limitations, but I didn't have a background in graphic arts, nor did I want to spend a great deal of money on posters that would gather dust and scuff marks sitting in my office between semesters. On the other hand, my students would be joining business and industry as representatives of my university, and I was not providing them with even one good example of quality visual aids in an oral report.

Most textbooks offer information on oral reporting, but this advice is commonly limited to avoiding the dreaded schwa, or improving eye contact. Most of them also stress the importance of graphics, but seldom do they include information or examples of oral report visuals, and if they do, such examples, being confined to the printed page, do not easily lend themselves to a demonstration of use in an oral report.

The models of oral reporting available to students are the teachers' own presentations on the various aspects of technical writing. The visuals accompanying these talks are nearly always the blackboard and, occasionally, the overhead projector. Both of these are useful for
communicating certain information—primarily listings; but they are static as well, for the visual impact of such devices is minimal. I cannot picture a professional giving a presentation before executives of a large corporation and relying on a blackboard. However, a teacher with interesting visual aids centered on one topic could demonstrate the effectiveness of a quality oral presentation.

One solution is a series of 35mm slides prepared on one aspect normally taught in the class, such as oral reports themselves, or the letter of application. The advantage of slides is that, unlike posters, they are easily stored in a small space on a bookshelf where they will not attract dust, and they offer large, colorful displays of visually-attractive information. They also allow a prepared sequence of material, and authentic, high-quality, professional samples.

Textbooks seldom discuss visual impact, and thus slides made from letters typed with different fonts should produce a useful discussion. After a few years of teaching, most instructors collect a supply of such sample communication. Some of these become ditto copies for the students, but such a method of reproduction does not do justice to a sparkling business letter. On slides, however, the letters will never crack or yellow with age, and the students will see the difference between a scribble, and a letter that demands the reader’s attention.

Virtually all schools offer slide projectors in the classroom if given 24 hour notice, and because slides enlarge on the screen, they can be seen by everyone. Some schools have staff who will make slides for faculty if the material is supplied; however, many teachers find it easier to produce these on their own. Here is how:

**MAKING SLIDES AS VISUAL AIDS**

**Obtaining Materials**

Film catalogs contains stills from old movies to which the clever photographer may add comic dialogue or captions. Drawings from academic junk mail are also useful because publishers often ornament sale catalogs with little sketches. When these are photographed above typed lettering, they become title slides. For example, a picture of Falstaff pontificating in a Shakespearean setting may be matched with the caption “Giving the Oral Report.” A Dickensian drawing of a Victorian sweat shop
might be “Communication in Today’s Business World.”

Cartoons are always enjoyable for an audience, and many of them refer to job interviews, problems in communication, or work world situations the students will be confronting. Cartoons frequently will make a point that a teacher might strive for over several class periods.

Equipment Needed

* A single lens reflex camera

* Slide film (any speed will work). While Kodak offers special copy films, I recommend buying the cheapest. K-Mart’s Focal Brand film works fine, or purchase Kodak’s Kodachrome 64. High speed film is not necessary except for specialized work.

* A set of close-up lenses or extension tubes. If wealthy, buy a macro lens.

* Not completely necessary but useful is a tripod or a copypod (a tripod designed specifically for copying).

* If your camera does not have a timer, a cable release will be useful.

* Duct tape, available at any hardware store, will keep the material flat on the copying table; later it can be placed across those parts of the finished slide you don’t want projected on the screen.

Making the Slide

1. Prepare your captions and visuals.

2. If possible, photograph on an overcast but bright day. Avoid any shadows crossing what you are photographing. If no clouds are available, indirect light is better than direct sunlight on the visual.

3. Set up your materials near a window and turn off electric lights. If you have a tripod or copy stand, attach the camera and place the visual material directly below the lens.

4. Use the necessary combination of close-up lenses or extension
tubes until the camera focuses on only the material you want in the finished visual. Get as close as you can so the letters and figures will appear large in the finished product.

a. Remember that most single lens reflex cameras show slightly LESS in the viewfinder than the film sees, so allow yourself some extra margin around the sides of the visual.

b. Adjust the f stop (lens opening) and shutter speeds until the camera's light meter registers a slight UNDEREXPOSURE of one f stop or less. If your camera is automatic, set it to Manual and underexpose by one f stop.

Hints: Most lenses are uniformly sharpest at f8, so try for this opening; and avoid shutter speeds slower than two seconds because this may cause a slight color change in the film.

c. Use a cable release or the camera's timer to avoid vibration.

CONCLUSION

I have two sets of slides: one demonstrates the use of visuals, and the second, what makes a good letter of application. For some letters I have several slides, one showing the entire letter, to demonstrate the visual impact; another showing only the first paragraph, which is often the hardest to write. The slide materials came from old business reports and student-generated samples. My most successful visuals, however, are cartoons. They offer color and artistic interest that I could not provide.

Whenever I find potential slide material, I set it aside and wait until I have slide film with a few exposures remaining—a frequent occurrence after a vacation or family visit. Finally, I note this all on my income tax form because, of course, this is all deductible.

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