Visual Aids and PowerPoint

Ask your instructor whether visual aids are allowed, required, or forbidden. Some instructors have very strong views on this question, both pro and con.

Visual aids are about your audience, not the speaker. Use visual aids to

* Help the audience understand a point
* Help the audience remember information
* Help the audience understand your presentation’s organization
* Capture or maintain the audience’s attention

A physical object, photo, map, sketch, chart, or model may be a useful visual aid, but it must be large enough to be seen by everyone in the audience. Consider the size of your room and the lighting. Do not pass objects around while you speak. This distracts the audience. They should be focused on your words. Even if you are not using PowerPoint more generally, a single image can be projected on the screen if it is sufficiently valuable. Weigh off the hassle of doing so against the value it adds.

Power Point is the most common visual aid application. It is often used poorly, which is why some instructors prohibit its use. When used correctly, Power Point can help you accomplish each of the audience goals in the bulleted list above. (Did you catch yourself looking up at the list? Without having that printed list to refer to, you probably would have already forgotten one or more of the points. This is one of the challenges of delivering information orally, and one of the ways that Power Point can help.)

Keeping the goals of visual aids in mind, sketch out what would be helpful to put in Power Point. The number of slides needed depends upon the topic’s nature and the presentation’s length. As a speaker, you should expect to remain on a slide for at least one minute and often for significantly longer. Ten slides is usually about right for a 20-30 minute talk. Most typically, speakers will have

* A title slide with the presentation title and speaker’s name.
* Sometimes a slide that supports the introduction
* A slide that conveys the organization of the presentation. If your presentation is short, this may not be needed.
* Slides to support the body of the presentation.
* A concluding or summary slide
* When appropriate, an acknowledgement or sources slide. Note, however, that including sources on a slide does not relieve the speaker of the obligation to acknowledge sources verbally.

When you are ready to start drafting slides

* Choose a background with a simple graphic from the templates. You can do something fancier or of your own design, but you can devote a lot of time to something that no one will really care about. Template backgrounds also occupy space on your slides. They may interfere with pictures or charts or cause you to use smaller fonts than you would like.
* Choose a simple sans-serif font such as Ariel or Calibri. It is more important to have a font style that is easier to read than to go for a fancy font
* Keep the font size large: 44-point for titles and 28-point for the body is ideal
* Keep high contrast between your background and the text. Generally a white or light background with black or dark text is best. Light text on a dark background is also fine, but can make your room very dark if lights are turned off.
* If your slide will be mostly text, use the Rule of Sixes—6 bullet points with 6 words per line. You can put more than that on a slide, but the more you add, the harder it is for your audience to read. Also, the more text you add, the more likely you are to read to the audience, something you should not do.
* Make pictures and graphics large enough to be seen at the back of the room.
* If your slide will be a graph or chart, increase the size of the labels so that they can be seen at the back of the room. Consider deleting several rows or columns from a table to simplify it and allow you to increase the font size on what remains. A chart or graph that your audience cannot read is useless.