

PowerPoint Design Principles

Signal to Noise Ratio (SNR)

What is the essence or primary message (signal) of what you are trying to state? What aspects of your slide are distracting or do not relate to this message (noise)? These questions get to the heart of the *Signal to Noise Ratio*. You want to maximize this ratio; that is, you want to add just enough to communicate your message while reducing the items, colors, text, or clutter that is not necessary.

Picture Superiority Effect

It's the old saying, "Pictures are worth a thousand words." In a presentation, you should use an image only if it can capture the essence of what you are saying. Research suggests that viewers don't necessarily learn a concept better with images, but they *retain* the information longer when images are used. However, you should only use an image if it does not provide additional noise.

Empty Space

Avoid the urge to fill space on your slides; rather, use empty space to your advantage. Empty space, also known as negative or white space, can be used to direct attention towards your points of emphasis. When working with or choosing images, the empty space within the image is often the place where you will put any necessary text. Consider the following concepts when working with empty space.

Balance – When you look at a slide, does it look like it will fall over? Or does it have good *balance* between the amount of information, the graphics, and the size of the font?

Symmetry vs. Asymmetry – Use a mix of both symmetry and asymmetry in your presentation. Symmetry, centering objects on the central vertical axis of the page, communicates formality and stability, while asymmetry is often more interesting, informal, and dynamic. The latter also better utilizes



Figure 1. This slide has too much *noise*. The audience doesn't know what to look at.



Figure 2. The same amount of energy produces a simple and clear focus of elements on the slide.

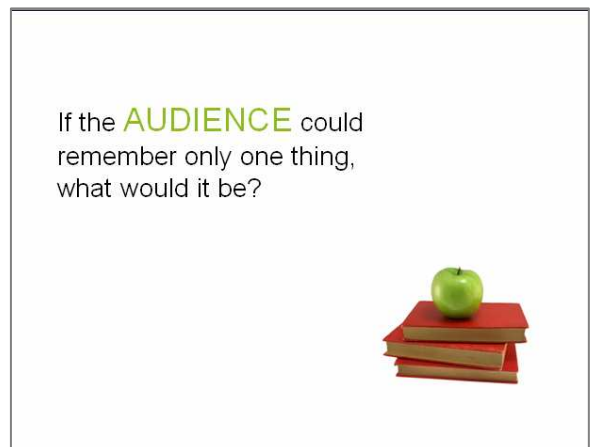


Figure 3. Empty space is used to direct the eye from one object or text to the next.

Instructional Technology

empty space as symmetry tends to push this space to the sides.

The Rule of Thirds – Avoid the temptation to place text and graphics dead center on the slide. Instead, place your points of emphasis at one of the four “power points.” These points are formed by dividing the slide into thirds both vertically and horizontally. Empty space will be created but will work to your advantage by guiding the viewers’ eyes to what you want them to focus on.

The Big Four

Contrast – The use of contrast helps users understand the point of your design immediately. Contrast is most simply defined as *difference*. A strong contrast in color, font, font size, or font weight (bold) attracts interest.

Repetition – If you re-use material or design concepts throughout a presentation, this repetition brings unity and consistency. Avoid repetition on every slide, such as logos or even template designs, as they are tiring to the viewer; that is, after the fifth slide, repeated elements start to become noise rather than signals. Some companies, however, will require the use of a specific template or logo for all presentation slides.

Alignment – To create unity among the elements within a single slide, carefully align the objects. Symmetry or asymmetry can allow for this. Presentation guru Garr Reynolds suggests that “every element is connected visually via an invisible line” (157). Right and left justification of information does this simply and effectively.

Proximity – Spend some time looking at each slide, examining the proximity of objects to one another. Closer objects will imply a closer relationship. Moving objects slightly further apart may present a more organized look. Grouping also creates empty space that guides the eye.



Figure 4. The Rule of Thirds helps spatially balance points of emphasis.



Figure 5. Varying color, font size, or timing can attract attention.

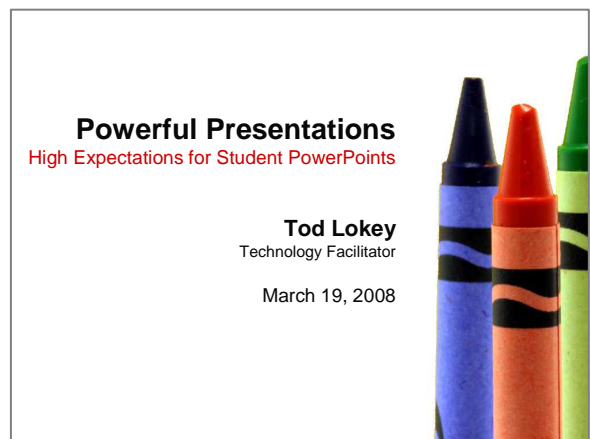


Figure 6. Aligning and grouping objects (proximity) visually connects elements on the slide.

SOURCE: Reynolds, Garr. 2008. *Presentation Zen. Simple ideas on presentation design and delivery.* Berkely, CA: New Riders.