The Speech Preview Project: Developing more effective visuals for a presentation

By Reed Markham, Daytona State College

Grade Level / Range: 12
Primary Subject: Language Arts
Secondary Subject: Social Studies
Other Subject(s): Public speaking
Materials Required: Computer/Project

Can you imagine viewing a speech about a diesel engine without a visual aid? How about a speech about music therapy without some music? Can you imagine observing a speech on diet fads with elaborate posters, book covers, and health products displayed and the speaker fails to discuss the visuals during the presentation? What are the best types of visuals for a speech?

The most successful speakers in America today use visuals in their presentations- Oprah Winfrey, Dr. Oz, Bill Gates, Tony Robbins to name a few. But for many speakers a visual is an afterthought. Some speakers fail to create an eye catching visual. Some speakers fail to practice their speech with a visual.

We live in a visual generation. Today's public audiences pay more attention to visuals. High quality visuals are essential to public speaking success. The Speech Visual Preview project is designed to help students prepare for their informative or persuasive speech presentations.

Visual aids can spice up any presentation. The old cliché that a picture is worth a thousand words is often true. Research shows that the use of professional visuals will increase your credibility as a speaker and help your audience to retain your information.

Speech Preview Instructions

In my experience, students need more time with the basics of using visuals in their presentations. One approach to help students prepare for using visuals in a speech is to have a Speech Preview. A Speech Preview is similar to a movie preview or trailer. Feature films are successfully advertised by exhibiting some of the highlights of a movie. The highlight can be a short clip or a series of clips. I like to show my students the film trailer for the popular Disney film, “Tangled.” The trailer can be found here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ip_0CFKTO9E

Following the video presentation I do the following:

1. Develop groups of 4 or 5 students. Make sure you select a group leader and a group note taker. The group leader is in charge of facilitating discussion and making sure that everyone participated. Group staring at the wall is not allowed. The note taker is responsible for writing down important ideas and suggestions. I ask the note taker to write down the names of each group member and to turn in the notes at the end of the class period.

2. Ask the groups to discuss why the Tangled film preview is attention getting. (Typically groups mention the fast pace, use of humorous dialogue, interesting animation, and high quality music.)
3. Review the group ideas on attention getting strategies as a class.

4. Ask the students to share their informative or persuasive speech topics with the small group.

5. Groups participate in brainstorming visuals for each of their topics. Urge students to go beyond the first good idea. Great ideas come from thinking about the same idea from a different perspective.
6. After the brainstorming process, the group eliminates “common knowledge” visuals from the list and focuses on the visuals that are more likely to be attention getting. Too many visuals in presentations are common knowledge to the audience. “New” visuals add an attention getting quality to a speech. Visuals can grab the attention of an audience in the introduction of a presentation or focus attention when the speaker is in the body of the presentation. One of the goals of this project is to help students get out of the habit of researching and using a visual without evaluating its potential value to the speech. Visuals also need to be relevant to the speech topic and add clarification and understanding.

7. Ask class members to find new and exciting visual possibilities on google/images for the next class. The assignment includes copying and pasting the visual to a word document. The document can be resized for all to see. Students should include the source of the visual. After developing a copy of the visual, students should upload the document/video as an attachment to their email. Students should prepare a 30-60 second verbal description of the visual. This will help the student to become more comfortable with referencing a visual during the presentation.

8. During the next class period, each student is asked to present their 30-60 second Speech Topic Preview. Before the student presentations, divide the class into groups of 4 or 5 and select another leader and note taker. The group evaluates each of the Speech Visuals. Is the visual attention getting? Does it relate to the student’s topic? Does the visual enhance the understanding of the speech topic? Is the visual new to the audience?

9. This project is followed by a discussion of my list of tips for effective use of visuals in a presentation.

Here are my top 10 strategies for using visuals for presentations:

1. Brainstorm ideas- brainstorm all the types of visual aids that could be used for your speech. Try researching on Google Images during your brainstorm.

2. Don’t forget impact- As you prepare your speech ask yourself the question: Would the impact of my speech on the audience increase with the use of the visual selected?

3. Reference visuals- Reference your visual during the speech. I have listened to many speeches where the speaker prepared a great visual aid but did not refer to it during the presentation.

4. Learn presentation technology- become familiar with new technology. For example, the use of PowerPoint or Prezi can enhance the quality of many types of presentations.

5. Be professional- nothing is worse than a poster that has been developed in hurry or a poorly organized handout. The quality of your credibility as a speaker can be greatly enhanced by a professional visual.
6. Practice, practice, practice your speech utilizing the visual aid. Practicing with the visual aid will help you to decide how much time to spend with the visual and whether the visual is adding or detracting from your presentation.

7. Avoid too many visuals- Don't overdo it with visual aids. Too many PowerPoint slides may detract from the presentation of your ideas and can waste valuable speaking time.

8. Avoid distractions-Don't pass visual aids around the audience during the presentation. Passing a handout or physical object around the audience is distracting and invites side conversations.

9. Add color- Use color in your visual aids. Color adds audience interest and increases the quality of your presentation.

10. Use attention getting visuals- Remember, for every speech topic there is a potential visual aid. The use of high quality visuals can make or break a presentation. Finish the Speech Visual Preview Project with your students by summarizing the importance of high quality visuals in our highly visual society.