

Graphics, done well, can enhance a story by illustrating and highlighting concepts. Or, done poorly, they can be a complete barrier to your story; they can distract and pollute your viewer's experience.

Have you ever seen presentation slides that look like this? Tons of bulleted text, dark colours, bad clip art that's stretched out or squashed, a font that looks like it's from the 1950s?

Anytime I see a slide like this it either makes me want to fall asleep or run screaming from the presentation. But more than that this slide is actually preventing me from fully engaging in the presentation because it's creating something called cognitive overload.

Think of when you're on your phone reading Twitter or Facebook and someone tries to have a conversation with you. Chances are you're not going to be able to listen to the person and read at the same time.

"Oh hey Alexandra, did you find out about that software for our presentation?"

"Oh ya I did, we just have to... are you listening?"

"Oh ya, totally, just seeing if Kevin got back to us."

"Unh, OK, so ya, we just have to download that free tool and then online there's a manual online that shows us how to build a unicorn out of pixie dust and lollipops."

"Ok, sounds good."

This is because the brain isn't very good at reading text while listening to someone speak at the same time.

So when you create a slide full of text, your audience is trying to read the slide while you're talking and they're not able to do either very well.

So when creating any kind of graphics, whether it's for videos or presentations, it's important to consider the impact on your viewer or reader. Now while the brain can't read and listen at the same time, it can look at pictures and listen at the same time.

Looking at images while someone is speaking can actually reinforce what's being said.

So keeping this in mind, here are some strategies to avoid cognitive overload in your slides and visuals.

Make sure you use graphics that reinforce what you're speaking about. Talking about World War 2? Show a picture of soldiers from WW2. Talking about anxiety? Show a picture of an anxious person.

Use large images, fill up the entire screen. If you are speaking about something specific in a picture, zoom in on that feature; try to reduce the amount of noise distracting your viewer.

Use only a few words per slide, if you need to add more text, have the text enter the slide a little at a time so that it's not overwhelming for your viewer.

Animate your graphics. A tip we teach in our video workshops is to make sure there is something happening on the screen every 3-5 seconds.

This can be a word fading in, a graphic appearing or any small movement. But, it's a trick that helps viewers pay attention. Just make sure you don't go overboard and have your graphics look or sound like a carnival ride!

One golden rule to follow is if you are showing how to use something, then show how to use it. Don't write 10 slides of text explaining how to use it. You could either do a live demo or record a demo, and show it during your presentation.

Whatever graphics you choose make sure you adhere to copyright law and as always cite your sources.

There are many websites with pictures, clipart, and stock photos that you can use, you can see some examples here. We also give you some tips for citing.

Well-designed graphics take practice so don't worry if you're not Leonardo Da Vinci on your first try. Just start with big bold images and colours and then see where your creativity takes you.

You can see some examples of awesome graphics in the links below.