

# THE EYES HAVE IT

Used well, visual media can make a real difference to the learning experience, says Roydon Gibbs. He outlines the essential factors for creating effective instructional material.

**HAVE YOU EVER HAD THE PAINFUL** experience of enduring a poorly designed PowerPoint presentation? You know the kind—rather than providing you with information, understanding or motivation—it left you with confusion, frustration and heavy eyelids. Of course, the promise of PowerPoint is that you can add something visual to a presentation. With visual media playing a significant role in today's world, looking for ways it can be used to enhance learning initiatives makes sense.

Technology offers us an array of innovative software, equipment and production processes with exciting ways to create and use both still and moving visuals. Used well, visual media can be engaging, inspiring and make a real difference to the effectiveness of instructional material. By contrast, the poor use of visual media—remember that PowerPoint—can interfere with meaningful learning. Applying visual media as an afterthought to instructional material simply for its wow factor or as an opportunity to use the latest technological gimmickry poses the risk of spawning an ineffective learning experience.

So, how can you lower this risk and get the return on investment you want when using visual media? Practice safe design and always use a concept.

For the use of visual media in instructional material to be *effective* there are three essential factors that need to be addressed when developing the design concept.

**Clarity of learning objectives** is the first. This means taking care of the three Cs:

- **Context:** Who are the learners? How much prior learning do they have? How and where will the learning happen?
- **Content:** What needs to be learned? Is it facts, processes, principles or a mix of these and more?
- **Consequences:** What results are desired from the learning? How will you know they have been achieved?

**Identification of the learning processes** that you need the visual media to support is the second factor to address. For instance do you need to: attract or direct attention, enhance recall and memory, improve comprehension, trigger new insights, or stimulate an emotional response? Wise choices can be made once these two factors have been addressed.

**Appropriate selection and use of visual media** is the third factor to address. Different types of visual media support different learning processes. Whether it is a photograph, diagram, animation, video or any other type of visual media, it needs to be selected for the way in which it supports the learning processes and objectives of the instructional material. The way it is then used can also significantly influence the effectiveness of learning.

Some excellent work has been published based on research in the field of cognitive psychology that provides guidelines on how to create the most effective results when using visual media. Applying sound principles of visual communication design is also indispensable.

Design and production of effective instructional material that uses visual media can often require the talent and expertise of a visual media designer. Providing a brief that addresses these essential factors will enable them to collaborate with you in creating a concept focused on principles of learning.

We live in a visual world. Used well, visual media can be engaging, inspiring and make a real difference to the effectiveness of instructional material. To get the return on investment you want when using visual media—'Practice safe design and always use a concept'.



**Roydon Gibbs is a learning and development specialist.**  
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