

# The Seven Cardinal Virtues of Oral Presentation

## VIRTUE

### No. 7

## VISUAL EFFECTIVENESS

*Ensure that everything the audience can see enhances and supports the message.*

Since all face-to-face presentations have a visual dimension, *what* the audience sees can make a difference. This is as true for the speaker's attire and body language as it is for images, graphs, and video: all are out there for the audience to interpret and evaluate. The visual elements should be as purposeful and well-prepared as all the other components of an effective presentation.

### ■ Mind your appearance and body language.

Marshall McLuhan's familiar maxim "the medium is the message" applies here. *You* are the medium for your message. How you look and act has a great effect on your audience's response to your message. Key tips:

- Dress appropriately for the audience and situation. "If you're going to give a presentation," says **Director of Opportunity Programs Phyllis Breland**, "look like you're going to give a presentation!"
- Make plenty of genuine eye-to-eye contact. "Nothing sucks the life out of a presentation more," says **Associate Professor of Philosophy Katheryn Doran**, "than [a speaker who's] looking at the podium or table (even if there are no notes on it!) or at the professor only or off into the middle distance." And avoid turning your back on your audience when you refer to your slides on the screen.
- "Keep good posture," urges **Professor of French John O'Neal**. "Do not lean on or slump over the lectern." Good posture conveys confidence and facilitates the deep abdominal breathing needed to project your voice.
- Energize your presentation. Let your enthusiasm show on your face and in your gestures.

### ■ Design visual media to maximize clarity and meaning.

Presentations can gain interest, clarity, and persuasiveness when the speaker's words are supported by images, maps, diagrams, or visual displays of data. While presentation software makes it easy to create visuals, slides are sometimes so poorly designed or used that they work *against* the speaker. To make your visuals more effective, apply the following advice:

- "Use fewer words, more pictures," suggests **Assistant Professor of Psychology Alexandra List**.
- Limit text to key words and phrases. When you must display lengthier passages, **Assistant Professor of Philosophy Russell Marcus** says, "Make sure to give your audience time to digest the words you present."
- Choose text and background colors for good contrast. Avoid busy, distracting slide backgrounds.
- Follow the principle of simplicity: Often a slide can be improved by taking something *away* rather than adding more.
- "Identify axes, units of measurement, etc., on graphs," says **Professor List**. "The audience hasn't looked at them as long as you have."
- "Don't make the audience hunt," cautions **Vice President for Administration and Finance Karen Leach**. "Highlight the important data."
- Be sure your slides pass what presentation expert Nancy Duarte, in her *Harvard Business Review* blog, calls "the glance test: People should be able to comprehend each one in about three seconds."
- When complex visuals are needed, take the time to explain them. Tell the audience what they're looking at, what's important, and what it means.
- Use animations and other effects *only* if they serve a purpose and don't become a distraction.
- "Be sure that what you are saying always corresponds directly to what is on the screen, recommends **Professor of History Kevin Grant**. "Avoid any disconnect between the oral and the visual."
- "Why are you showing this slide?" asks **Vice President Leach**. "Give the audience the *message*."

## Cultivate Your Virtues

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