

3 Must-Have Strategies for Creating Effective Visuals for Engineering Presentations, Reports, & Proposals

When using a visual, you should have a reason for doing so. However, writers often use visuals because it “seems like the thing to do.” When visuals have little or no strategy behind them, they can be used incorrectly or ineffectively, which can:

- Cause confusion and misunderstandings
- Waste valuable space
- Create non-persuasive visuals

For engineers, there’s often a lot of material to cover in documents, and engineers frequently overwhelm their audience with technical detail. This handout’s information will aid your engineering team in creating presentations, reports, and proposals that use visuals effectively. Without further ado, here are three principles and corresponding strategies to create effective visuals.

1. The Multimedia Effect → Learning from words and pictures is more effective than from words alone.

Strategy: Complement visuals with titles, subheadings, and descriptions that tell the reader what the visuals are and what important messages the reader should take from the visuals. Providing context through text will help readers understand what the visual is communicating and its importance.

Practical Application Question: Do my visuals include the context the reader needs?

2. The Redundancy Principle → Redundant material hurts, rather than helps, learning and remembering.

Strategy: Repetition and redundancy are different. Repetition is the recurrence of a word, phrase, or concept for a purpose. Redundancy is the reappearance of a word, phrase, or concept without a purpose. If information needs to be repeated, there should be a valid reason

for doing so. If repetition is warranted, the information should be presented in a different way while keeping the heart of the content the same to avoid redundancy.

Practical Application Question: Have I repeated myself and, if so, is the repetition necessary and different in some way?

3. The Coherence Principle → Information is learned and retained better when extraneous material is removed.

Strategy: All information in visuals should support the action you want your readers to take, whether that's a physical action or getting them to agree with you. This means that visuals should be included only if they contribute to driving home the message of the document.

Practical Application Question: How do your visuals serve the overall purpose? What new and important work is the visual doing?

Application Tool

Question	Answer
Does my visual have enough context for my reader to understand the visual's importance?	
Have I repeated myself? If so, is the repetition necessary and different?	
What is my visual accomplishing/doing for my document?	

Want more?

Check out our:

- Hurley Write's "5 Guidelines for Engineers to Use Visuals Effectively"
- The Writing Docs Podcast (<https://www.hurleywrite.com/podcasts>)
- Business Writing Blog (<https://www.hurleywrite.com/blog/>)
- Whitepapers (<https://www.hurleywrite.com/white-papers>)
- Live Webinar Series (<https://www.hurleywrite.com/webinar-videos>)
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