Guidelines for Presentation Graphics
(Slides and Overheads)

Everybody in the room must be able to read your graphics. Don’t you hate it when a speaker puts up slide after slide with 20 lines of tiny typed text? Don’t you hate it when a speaker puts up a slide that you can’t decipher and says, “Sorry, I don’t know if you can see this, but I just put it in here to show that...”? Don’t you hate it when a speaker puts up a handwritten overhead that’s illegible? DON’T DO that!

Your graphics don’t have to stand alone. Figures submitted with manuscripts are expected to be able to stand alone, with enough detail to be understood by someone who has never seen the rest of the text. You have to forget this when making graphics to back up an oral presentation. Your graphics won’t be standing alone; you will be standing right there beside them. YOU will be giving the talk, not the graphics.

Rule #1. Make things big enough for everyone to read.

Rule #2. Simplify things enough so that they will be readable.

- If you can get more than eight lines of text on a horizontal graphic, your text is too small. Make it bigger.

- Sans-serif type like this is easier to read at a distance than type with serifs like this, & lower case text like this is easier to read than all caps LIKE THIS.

- Light text on dark backgrounds and dark text on light backgrounds are much easier to read than one medium color on another.

- Don’t use whole sentences; use phrases or key words. Use abbreviations, and “&”.

- Round numbers to 2 significant digits.

- Try to limit text to no more than 6 lines (never more than 8).
  - tables to 3 rows × 3 columns, or 2 rows × 4 columns (or 4 × 2).
  - line graphs to 4 lines.
  - bar graphs to 12 bars (4 groups of 3, 6 groups of 2, or 12 single, etc.).

Different colored lines or bars are much easier to follow than different dot/dash patterns or hatching patterns.

- Use colors for coding. Color can convey additional information without using additional space. Be consistent; use the same colors to mean the same things throughout your talk. Try to choose colors that are not the same value (lightness/darkness); they are easier for everyone to distinguish, but especially the colorblind folks in the audience.

- Design your slides on paper in a space 2" × 3"; if it’s a good slide, it will all fit. And go over your finished slides by holding them up to the light, with no magnifier. If you can read them that way, they will be readable to your audience on the screen.