Creating a New Slide Ideology
We are all inherently visual communicators. Consider kindergarten: crayons, finger paints, and clay propelled our expression, not word processors or spreadsheets.

Yet, the stories you told with these limited means were at least as good—perhaps better—than what you can accomplish with today’s technology. For instance, the following image was painted by Lucas, the son of a friend of mine. On first glance it looks like meaningless globs of paint. But Lucas’ story is about a penguin party, and in that context, the images make brilliant sense. The greater message here is that stories are how people understand and relate to the world, and they naturally associate those stories with appropriate imagery.

Unfortunately, somewhere, at some time, someone probably told you that you weren’t very good at drawing. And, after looking around and comparing yourself to other kids in the classroom, you probably consented, threw in the towel, and decided that piano lessons or football might prove a better bet for primary education glory.

Now, as an adult, you may not try anymore—at least in the visual realm. This is ironic considering that your employers and colleagues assess you by how well you communicate—a skill that is reflected in annual reviews, pay increases, promotions, and even your popularity. Effective communication is a job requirement now, whether you’re trying to beat competitors, communicate vision, demonstrate thought leadership, raise capital, or otherwise change the world. And like it or not, your profession likely requires you to communicate using a visual tool, regardless of your proficiency or training in this medium. Business schools in particular drill their students in management, accounting, and technology, but few offer anything approaching Design 101—the one thing that combines creative thinking, analytics, data assimilation, and the inherent ability to express oneself visually.
Case Study: Mark Templeton
Communication Pays Off

Mark Templeton credits his trajectory from mid-level manager to CEO solely to his personal investment in communication. Once a manager focused on tactics, he evolved into a leader by becoming a student of communications and learning how to instill vision.

Studying storytelling and leveraging his innate ability to think visually helped Templeton become a leader able to easily convey his vision for Citrix—a task not easily done given the abstract and invisible nature of the company’s products and solutions. “My goal is to say more with fewer words,” says Templeton, “and the presentation medium forces you to put all your thoughts into a consumable sequence.”

Not that his staff cuts him any slack: “There’s an ongoing wager among my staff about how far into a meeting we’ll get before I pick up a marker and start drawing on the whiteboard,” he says. “But ultimately the visual approach pays off.”

His communication investment has paid off for Citrix investors, too: the company became one of the fastest software companies to reach $1 billion in annual revenue.
Now that you’ve generated several ideas, begin to sketch pictures or scenes from them. These sketches become visual triggers that spark more ideas.

The sketching process should be loose and quick—doodles really. Search through stock houses, magazines, even YouTube for images and vignettes to reference while sketching. Generate as many pictures as you can while keeping in mind the slide layout; you want to ensure that the elements work spatially in that format. In this way, sketching serves as proof-of-concept because ideas that are too complex, time-consuming, or costly will present themselves as ripe for elimination.

Don’t worry about throwing things away—that’s why you generated a lot of ideas in the first place. In fact, you’re ultimately going to have to throw all of them away except for one. Designers recognize this as the destructive aspect of the creative process; it’s a good thing.

Some of the ideas you generate may require multiple scenes built across a few slides versus a snapshot on a single slide. On the other hand, sometimes it’s as simple as using the perfect picture or diagram. Getting your great idea across might require that you manipulate an image, create a custom illustration, or produce a short video. Focus on whatever works best, not on the idea that’s easiest to execute.

If you sketch, it can sometimes be difficult for others to imagine your overall vision. Collecting images that represent the feeling of the final artwork often helps communicate your intent.

Script: The garden that is the internet can be a dangerous place, and you don’t always know when <SNAP!> something bad is going to happen.

There are plenty of dangers out there, and it takes all you’ve got to keep safe.
Now, find a colleague or two and walk them through your sketches. Have them give you feedback on what works, given your audience and personal style. They’ll likely have insights that will improve your idea.

Here’s where it gets a bit more difficult. Depending on the concept you’ve identified as the one best suited to convey your idea, you may or may not have the skills to execute the idea digitally. Be prepared to enlist the help of a designer (you did plan far enough ahead to make sure you’ve got one available, right?). There’s no shame in seeking professional help, after all; what’s important is effective communication, regardless of whether you have the skill set to execute it.

But what if someone was looking out for you, taking care of menaces and eliminating threats before they become a problem?

That’s what our virus stopper was designed to do—eliminate threats and protect your data so you can get back to business.

**TIP**
Keep yourself visually and conceptually fed by watching films, visiting museums, and reading design-related publications.
Abstract Concepts: Radiate

**From a point:** Occurs when a single directional “burst” emerges from either a graphic or point that has a clear point of origin.

**With a core:** Creates a parent-child relationship. The outer elements connect with a central element to hold the family together.
Without a core: Implies that elements connect through proximity or mutual attraction. They are tied to one central area.

You've noticed that the abstract concepts are usually shapes that are combined to show relationships. In this next section you'll see a sampling of diagrams that are realistic. It is by no means exhaustive. There's no limit to how you tell your story visually.
When it comes to displaying data in your presentation, you must adhere to one principle above all others: clarity.

Projecting your data on a slide puts you at an immediate disadvantage to printing it in a white paper or scientific text. In a presentation, the audience doesn't have the benefit of being able to pull your data in close to examine it.

So it is absolutely crucial that any data in your presentation carries with it a clear message. And you can keep that message clear by remembering this one fact:

**Data slides are not really about the data. They are about the meaning of the data.**

Most presenters don’t really understand this distinction. How many times have you sat through presentations where the speaker referred to one complicated chart for five minutes, after which you still couldn’t figure out the point of the slide?

The problem is that, most of the time, slides aren’t a good medium for showing complex data. When it’s important for your audience to examine the data and come to their own conclusions, you should distribute the data as a printout.
A cluttered or overwhelming data slide can derail even the most compelling speaker, so only show data in your presentation if the data helps you better illustrate your conclusions. And be sure to display it in a way that the audience can absorb easily (even from the cheap seats).

Use the following five principles to present your data in the clearest possible way:

1. Tell the truth
2. Get to the point
3. Pick the right tool for the job
4. Highlight what’s important
5. Keep it simple
Keeping It Simple

Save the decorations for the holidays. A common theme throughout this book has been the idea of simplicity, so it should come as no surprise that simplicity is important when displaying data for projection. In fact, simplicity is more important when displaying data, since the data itself can often confuse the viewer. It’s equally critical to keep your data slides free of unnecessary clutter.

Unfortunately, presenters face other temptations when it comes to charts and graphs. No matter the software being used, there are a wealth of buttons, bullets, lines, ticks, gradients, borders, fills, and other chart decorations that can quickly overwhelm the data on the slide. Edward Tufte, author of *The Cognitive Style of PowerPoint*, refers to these as “chartjunk” or “PowerPoint Phluff”. Do your best to avoid all unnecessary visual distractions and the message will come through much clearer.

Data in this matrix is the same as the plotted data and can be removed.

Instead of a legend, put the identifier in the graph.

Modify the background elements so they are secondary to the data.
Create more visual differentiation by increasing the space between sets of bars.

It’s rarely necessary to show a table and accompanying chart on the same slide.

Fix typo and title case
Reduce the number of colors and assign neutral colors to the secondary information.
Simplify the legend by removing the border, reducing the font size, and visually separating the primary information from the secondary information.
De-emphasize the background grid by lightening the color.

AFTER: The presenter wanted to emphasize how Sun and Dell were performing against each other.
The October 2007 *Fast Company*’s letter from the editor featured an intriguing chart depicting how design contributes to the bottom line. The Design Council compared a portfolio of 63 design-driven British companies and how they beat the broader market:

To quote the letter, “Studies have shown that design-oriented firms in all kinds of industries outperform their more-traditional peers—that design and innovation go hand-in-hand with financial success.”

**It’s easy to tell when a company has design as a systemic value system. From product design to slides, you can tell which companies cherish design and value their brand.**

What is a “design-oriented” firm? Companies like Apple, Target, Procter & Gamble, and Dyson all have design as a core part of their value-system.

This is not to say that dressing up your presentations will cause your stock to increase. Indeed, dressing up anything is counterintuitive to good design.
You can also tell that these companies value their customers. Design is not solely about making things aesthetically pleasing, although that is part of it. Design, at its core, is about solving problems. And whatever that problem is—from squeezing oranges to running faster to communicating effectively—designers strive to help users solve their dilemma in the most convenient, simple, and elegant way. Essentially, designers focus on the experience, making it as beautiful and memorable as possible.

To succeed as a presenter, you must think like a designer.

Every decision a designer makes is intentional. Reason and logic underpin the placement of visual elements. Meaning underscores the order and hierarchy of ideas. Previous chapters highlighted the importance of understanding your audience, honing your key ideas and messages, and expressing yourself through appropriate diagrams and data. Now it’s time to put those theories into practice. And though it is scant substitute for a formal design education, these next few chapters give nondesigners a design baseline that they can refer to when confronted by the empty expanse of a virgin slide.
Case Study: Al Gore
A Brand Makeover

In addition to his other prominent achievements—serving as Vice President, winning an Academy Award, garnering the Nobel Peace Prize—Al Gore has done more than any other individual to legitimate multimedia presentations as one of the most compelling communication vehicles on the planet. He has focused the world’s attention on climate change, and it all began with a slide show. He has proven that presentations can tap emotions to incite grassroots change. He is the poster child for the transformative powers of a great presentation. Ultimately, his approach was truly fit for the silver screen.

Gore’s journey started when he dusted off his 35mm slide carousel from the ’70s and transformed it into a multimedia presentation. By early 2003 he was traveling the world delivering his revived passion for the environment. Long before the idea of a movie was on the table, he delivered his presentation at hundreds of venues. Climate change was yet to be a ubiquitous cause. Watching Gore on stage was transformational. This wasn’t the stodgy former Vice President that people had come to expect from the campaign trail. From the moment Mr. Gore took the stage, he was fired up, passionately saving the world from its own burning fate. He paced, yelled (a bit), and was ultimately quite charming. This man had a mission. He was alive, charismatic, fluid, candid, and animated. Without exception, his audience left feeling informed and inspired. You could sense the momentum building.

Mr. Gore elevated his visual strategy and staging choreography to a whole new level. Now that the film An Inconvenient Truth has reached a mass audience, many people across the country and around the world have changed their perceptions of him as well. He has achieved a significant brand makeover. The July 2007 issue of Fast Company reported:

“In one of the most remarkable personal turnarounds of all time, Mr. Gore reinvented the way people respond to him. He’s gone from guarded Washington politician to a Hollywood celebrity to a celebrated international leader.”

Ellen McGirt
Fast Company

Beyond possessing a visceral, long-nurtured passion for the cause, much of his success can be attributed to the significant investment he makes in internalizing the subject matter and rehearsing the delivery. He also seeks and takes expert guidance.

No one can ignore his personal communication transformation. He passionately knows his content, his slides add value to his story, and he is comfortable in his delivery. He’s impacting our world, one slide at a time.
Al Gore
Former Vice President of the United States
Sergio Dionisio/Getty Images
Unity: Sensing the Structure of Information

You can achieve unity through structure (grid), look (graphical style), and theme (big idea). Here, you’ll focus on the grid.

Since every brand and presenter is unique, the grid used should reflect you or your company.

**A grid system provides a flexible way to organize content.**

To guide the organization of content, create rectangular regions for placement of elements. Each region is a container for an element, such as a block of text or an image.

Placing objects within a grid anchors the individual elements so they don’t bounce around or appear like they were positioned haphazardly or randomly. This stability helps the audience identify patterns in the placement of content. Having text and graphics show up in the same place, anchored to the same points, helps an audience anticipate where content will appear. Additionally, grids ensure that across multiple slides of a similar layout, elements don’t appear to “jump.” For instance, if three consecutive slides feature graphs, the location of their axes should remain constant even though the data changes.

Grids also help streamline design decisions for corporations where thousands of employees develop slides independently. Organizations benefit from the ability to re-use slides when they look similar and follow a basic grid system.

Once you’ve sketched out a grid that you like, pencil in where you might place images, text, and objects. Be sure to leave plenty of the tiles open to preserve clear space. Now, draw the grid lines in your presentation application and place it on the master slide, being sure to remove the grid when you’ve completed the design process. To speed development of your presentation in the future, save the grid as a tool by pasting it into a new file or saving it on a slide at the very back of your deck.
The slides below were created in four different grid patterns. The orange grids with gray boxes serve as keys for the slides beneath them. You can see how the elements fit into the grid.

These slides look uniform because the grid gives them structure.
Remember the 3-second rule.

Presentations are a “glance media”—more closely related to billboards than other media. It requires commuters to process quickly as they drive past. Imagine having a billboard full of bullets, drivers would crash trying to process the ads.

Ask yourself whether your message can be processed effectively within three seconds. The audience should be able to quickly ascertain the meaning before turning their attention back to the presenter. For comparison, consider that when billboards first appeared, a public outcry ensued over concerns of driver safety and visual pollution of the landscape. Interestingly, relatively few protests have aired against the visual pollution in meeting rooms across corporate America.

Content should lend itself to quick processing, and should be typeset correctly.

When Apple’s Macintosh first debuted, anyone with a computer could now be a desktop publisher. At Duarte, we dove in head first and were thrilled when a reputable design firm invited us in for a portfolio review. While reviewing our work, the Creative Director’s expressions and line of questions made me squirm. Over and over, she asked probing questions about our typesetting decisions. I could tell she was not impressed. She told us that we needed to master type if we wanted to stand out from all the novices entering the field in droves. We took her advice and studied the masters.
Her advice was timely. Shortly after, we were approached by Adobe and Apple, who both treat type as a critical component to the success of their brands. They took as much care around the treatment of type as they did their concept, copy, images, and layouts. Our accurately typeset presentations helped us land these accounts.

Some might say that typesetting isn’t worth the extra time for a presentation. But type is a fundamental part of our culture and has been for centuries. Most people can inherently and easily recognize when type is balanced and used well.

Before computers, typesetting was a specialized skill and honorable profession. Digitization of fonts and the advent of the personal computer spawned a massive generation of users who don’t understand the context and beauty in carefully typeset design.