Lecture 31
Using Visual Aids

Lecture Outline:
In this lecture we will learn to look for places where visual aids will help you achieve your communication objectives.
Choose visual aids appropriate to your objectives
Make your visual aids easy to understand and use
Fully integrate your visual aids with your prose

More than Just Visual Aids:
In some situations, visual aids can carry the entire message. For instance, if you’ve ever flown, you may recall reaching into the pocket on the back of the seat ahead of you to pull out a sheet of instructions for leaving the plane in an emergency. Many airlines use sheets that are wordless.

Computers and Visual Aids:
For instance, if you are using a program to make a line graph, you will still have to decide which variable to place on the horizontal axis and which on the vertical axis. You will still have to decide what intervals to use for your variables, and what your labels should say.

Guidelines:
Look for places where visual aids will help you achieve your communication objectives. The first step in using visual aids effectively is to search actively for places where they can help you achieve your communication objectives.

Clarify the relationships among numerical data:
On the job, you may need to describe the relationships among various pieces of data, which may be from laboratory research, surveys etc.
Visual aids can help you make those relationships immediately clear to your readers using graphs and other visual techniques.

Support your arguments:
You can also use visual aids to present information in support of your persuasive points. For example, the manufacturer of a plastic insulating material can use visual aids like graphs to persuade greenhouse owners of the comparable effects of different kinds of plastics.

Make detailed information easy to find:
For many tasks, visual aids are much easier than prose for readers to use. For example, a manufacturer of photographic film wants to inform trainees of the length of time they should leave the film in the developer solution. Since the time depends on several factors like tank size, temperature etc, and the information can be conveyed effectively by using a simple table.

Consider your readers’ tasks:
Different visual aids are suited to different reading tasks, often the same information can be presented in many different ways. For instance, Ben has collected information on the starting salaries of people who graduated from three different departments.
Which visual aid should he use?

Consider your readers’ attitudes:
In addition to thinking about your readers’ tasks, you should also look to pick the type of visual aid that most quickly and dramatically communicates the evidence that supports your persuasive point.
For instance, showing the effect of a decrease in revenue in a line graph is much more suitable than a tabular form which requires the readers to do a lot of subtracting to appreciate
the extent of the decrease. Although they are very informative to people who understand the symbols and conventions used, they will only baffle others. Be especially careful to avoid making the mistake of assuming your potential readers know how to read specialized figures.

**Make your visual aids simple:**
Avoid the temptations of cramming too much information into your visual aids. Sometimes, two or three visual aids can communicate the same information more effectively than one. Simplifying visual aids also means removing unnecessary details.

**Label the important content clearly:**
While it is important for you to eliminate unnecessary details from your visual aids, it is also critical to include labels for the important content. Labels also help people know what they are seeing when they read a figure.

**Provide Informative Titles:**
Titles help your audience find the visual aids they are looking for and know what the visual aids contain when they find them. To help your audience understand and use your visual aids, you should make the descriptive part of your titles as brief – yet informative – as possible. Titles typically include both a number and a description. Visual aids are numbered consecutively, either in one long sequence through the entire communication, or with a new sequence in each chapter.
According to custom, the numbers assigned to figures are usually Arabic (1, 2, 3...) while numbers assigned to tables are either Arabic or Roman (I, II, III...)
You should note that sometimes you *don’t* need to provide a title for a visual aid. That happens, for instance, when you are including a very short table in your text in a way that makes perfectly clear what it contains. Similarly, the visual aids in brochures are often untitled, though they are much rarer in reports and proposals.

**Fully integrate your visual aids with your prose:**
You should integrate your visual aids with your prose so that they work together harmoniously to create a single, unified message.
Three ways to do that are:
- To introduce your visual aids in your prose
- State the conclusions you want your readers to draw
- Make your visual aids easy to find

**Introduce your visual aids in your prose:**
Sometimes, your introduction to a visual aid will have to include information your readers or listeners need in order to understand or use the visual aid. Whatever kind of introduction you make to a visual aid, place it at the exact point where you would like your readers to focus their attention to it.

**State the conclusions you want your readers to draw:**
You might find it helpful to think of the sentences in which you explain a visual aid’s significance as a special kind of topic sentence. Just as the topic sentence at the head of a paragraph, you can tell your audience the point to be derived from the various facts that follow.

**Make your visual aids easy to find:**
If you place the figure farther away than that (for instance in an appendix), you can help your readers by providing the number of the page on which the figure may found.