Multimedia Tutorial #5

Using Color - Part I

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Choosing the best colors for a presentation can play a vital role in winning over an audience. Color is not just for decoration; it can help to determine whether the text is legible, emphasize important points, and even help to establish the emotional response of the audience. Studies have shown that proper use of color can dramatically improve the ability of the audience to understand and remember what is said. Proper color selection is an important factor in determining the success of a presentation. Since the typical presentation software package offers a complete spectrum of colors, the challenge is to select those that will be most effective.

It is common when creating a presentation to begin by selecting a consistent set of colors for the background, text, bullets, and other elements in each frame. This set of colors is called a palette. Typically, presentation software packages provide a number of palette selections and may even suggest palettes based on the type of presentation. The palette should generally be consistent throughout a presentation, allowing the introduction of different color choices for emphasis. To select intelligently among the standard palettes available or to design a custom palette, it is essential to understand some basic ideas about using color.

It is important to have a strong contrast between the text colors and the background so that the text will be easy to read. Consequently, dark background colors are the most common choice. A pastel background often makes the text, no matter what color it is, difficult to see from the back of a large classroom. In addition, a good background will establish a desired mood. Some colors, like bright yellow, may seem attractive because they are bright and cheerful, but they can also become visually tiring rather quickly. The three most commonly recommended background colors are dark blue, dark green, and dark red.

Many presenters have adopted deep blue as a standard background. It seems to create an impression of quality and calmness, which may explain why it is considered to be so valuable for sales presentations. In addition, it offers an excellent contrast for the common text color choices and so normally produces a very readable presentation. The main disadvantage here is that so many presenters use this background that it may seem unoriginal to an audience; however, most lecturers should want to consider using this as one of their basic options.

Professional trainers and others who hope to encourage audience participation often choose dark green as the background, because this color seems to stimulate interaction. Informal observation suggests that educators are less likely to use this color. It may have some significant benefits and thus so should be considered as an option.

Deep red tends to be used rarely, because it suggests danger, perhaps because it is the color of blood. Some studies have even shown that a red background will slightly increase the audience's pulse and breathing rates. (Gambling casinos often use red because it also seems to encourage risk taking.) On the other hand, a lecturer trying to hold the attention of a group of sleepy students may find that shifting to a red background on at least some presentations is beneficial.

The two most common text colors are white and yellow, because these colors will give a strong contrast with the deep background colors recommended previously and make the text most readable. Reds, oranges, and yellows are described as advancing colors, because they attract attention and are the first things noticed on a frame. This is exactly what is needed for the text. On the other hand, blues and greens are receding colors; they are normally overlooked at first, which makes them excellent background colors. Pastels and other weak colors are to be avoided for both background and text because they not only make the frame harder to read, but also they tend to be viewed as weaker colors.

Some final words of advice about using color. First, and most important, check the presentation under the same circumstances where it will be used to insure that it is legible. Often a combination that looks great on the computer screen in your office will look much different in the classroom, either because of the light levels in the room, computer problems, or a poor projector.

Second, keep the number of different colors to a minimum. This is clearly a case where less is more. The object is not to produce a circus poster but rather an effective presentation. As noted in previous articles in this series, when the bells and whistles of the presentation become the main audience focus, the material being presented is overlooked. Using a wide variety of colors on the same frame can detract seriously from the presentation.

Having established a simple, consistent palette, it is now possible to use an alternative color combination to communicate a change in the presentation. For example, a different palette will make it easier for students to recognize cooperative exercises, or a red text against a white background can signal to the students that the material is important and should receive special attention.

Selecting a palette is one of the most important decisions when designing a presentation. This short article has attempted to emphasize a simple, workable scheme for accomplishing this choice. The next article in this series will discuss some problems that can arise because of basic visual psychology.