



## Making School Finance Understandable

### In This Minute

School business officials must ensure that the complex financial issues school districts face are understandable to a broad range of stakeholders. Learning strategies to communicate clearly and succinctly is a crucial skill, and designing effective presentations for public use is a critical part of that skill set.

### Talking Points

For all our rational and analytic abilities, humans respond to visuals far more strongly than text—that's how our brains are wired. PowerPoint and other desktop publishing tools have made it much easier to develop strong visual presentations, making design a key part of communicating financial issues in a clear and effective way.

One study says presentations with visuals are 43% more effective than ones without them, yet the average PowerPoint slide has 40 words. By contrast, when Steve Jobs introduced Apple's first iPhone, his entire presentation used just 19 words. Simply put, simplicity works.



The number of words Steve Jobs used in his initial iPhone presentation.

*When Steve Jobs introduced Apple's first iPhone, his entire presentation used just 19 words. Simplicity works.*

### Keeping It Simple

The simpler a presentation, the more effective it will be. That means conciseness in written communications and the deliberate choices of visuals in presentations, as discussed below.

Accounting and art may not necessarily mix, but thinking through the design of a presentation can be as important as the content in terms of connecting with an audience.

Consider the difference between including a complete balance sheet on a PowerPoint slide, as compared to focusing on two or three of the most important points, supported by visuals that reinforce the stakes. The latter is far more likely to leave a lasting impression, while the former is more likely to be remembered as illegible and confusing.

However, simplicity is just the beginning. Design choices can reinforce key messages and make presentations more effective, easier to understand, and memorable. Key strategies for effective presentations include the following:

*Start at the beginning.* Often ignored, the title slide sets the tone for the entire presentation. It also provides the audience's first impression of the speaker. Make it professional and memorable.

## Making School Finance Understandable (continued)

*Be original.* Avoid overused templates and stock images. Predictable, repetitive visuals may send the unintended message that you don't care about your presentation.

*Boot the bullets.* No one will remember 10 bullets on a single slide. Instead, devote one slide to each important idea and have no more than six supporting points for each one.

*Pick the right pictures.* People are hardwired to respond to the human face, so photos of children and others impacted by financial decisions can boost the impact of your presentation.

*Carefully consider colors.* The choice of color depends on where a presentation will be held. Use dark backgrounds and lighter text in dark rooms, and lighter backgrounds and dark text in brightly lit ones. In either case, be sure to select one dominant color to use throughout the presentation.

*Find the correct font.* Like images, the choice of fonts may convey unspoken messages. Some appear professional, modern and clean. Above all, don't forsake legibility in order to be creative.



*Charts are like garlic—that is, they should be used, but sparingly. Avoid slides with multiple charts. One at a time is enough.*

*Hold the cheese.* Avoid trite visuals and transitions. They may detract from your message, and like the default stock images, they may unintentionally convey the message that you don't care about your presentation. Conversely, humor may be a welcome respite in a lengthy presentation. Keep a folder of humorous images that may be used in appropriate places in future presentations.

*Charts are like garlic.* That is, they should be used, but sparingly. Avoid slides with multiple charts—one at a time is enough. Each graph should also limit the number of elements, such as the slices in a pie chart or bars in a bar chart, to four to six in order to ensure people don't get lost in the details when you're trying to illustrate a trend.

### What's Next?

Bear in mind that it takes a lot of time and effort to make complex ideas easy to understand. Focusing on conciseness and the effective use of visuals, while a challenging process, yields real benefits when communicating with the many stakeholders to which a school system is accountable.

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Content for this School Business Minute came from ASBO International's 2015 Annual Meeting & Expo session "Making School Finance Understandable - Again."

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