E2A Tool Kit:
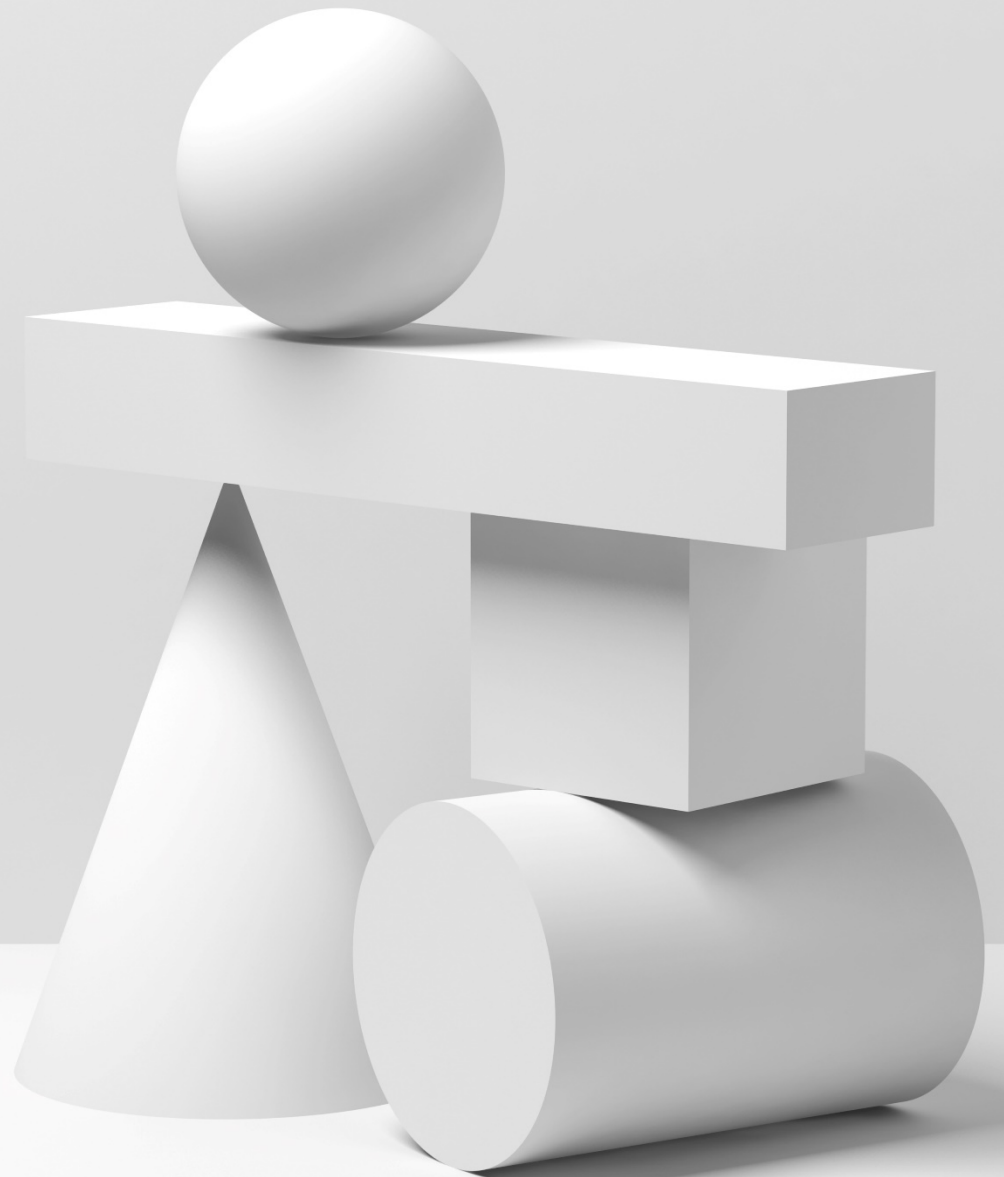
IV. Presentations

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IV. Presentations

> "Presenting is a fundamentally different form of communication than writing."
> Jonathan Schwabish, *Better Presentations*

Let's begin with a scenario. You learn about a research presentation on an important topic. You make time to attend. You are excited about learning something new and applying it. But the researcher presenting starts with a wordy slide deck. The content seems to be excerpted from a report: full sentences, detailed graphs, and tables. The font is small. The slides are full of detail that is hard to read. You start reading the slides, instead of listening. That might be okay because the presenter is also reading the slides verbatim. The phrase "death by PowerPoint" springs to mind. Half an hour in, on slide 30, you finally start to hear findings and conclusions. By this time, you've started multitasking. At the end, you retain little of what the key takeaways were and how to apply them. Should you just have read the report instead? Then again, it's probably very long as well.

This chapter provides guidance on planning, content development, design, and delivery to make this scenario the exception, not the norm. We draw on multiple sources, which are listed at the end of this chapter, most notably Jonathan Schwabish's *Better Presentations* (2016).

Key Steps

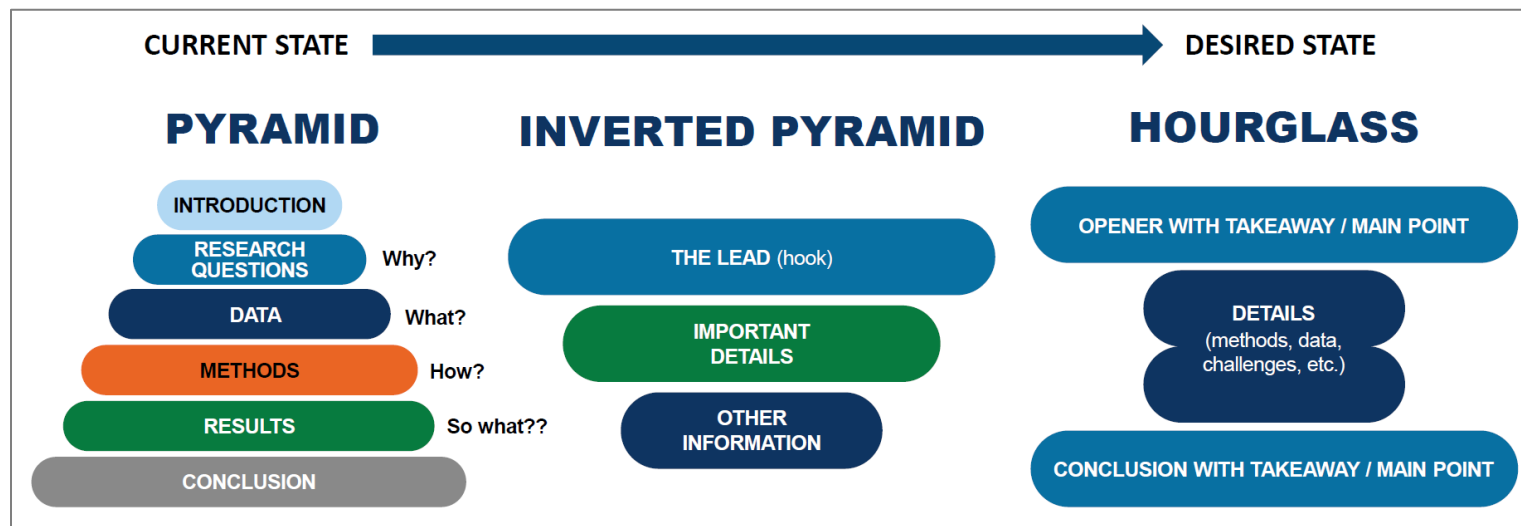| Plan	Develop Content	Design for Focus	Deliver/Disseminate

Step 1: Plan

1. **Embrace that presentations offer a unique opportunity to "sell" research findings.** Good presentations make findings enticing and memorable to the audience. They increase the odds that the audience will understand, apply, and share what they learned. They are *not,* in most instances, a chance to sell your methods – unless you're presenting at a technical research conference.

2. **Plan on customizing the content for your audience.**

   ▪ It's important to understand and customize the presentation for each audience and their needs (see Chapter II. Planning for E2A Products).

3. **If presenting for an hour, plan on following the 10-20-30 rule of thumb.**

   ▪ Aim for a maximum of **10 slides** with substantive content, not counting the cover, transition, and final slides. (This is a target, not a hard-and-fast rule; you may slip to 12 and that is okay.) There are exceptions – where slides are complex, it is better to break them into multiple slides, with each consecutive slide layering in more information.

   ▪ Limit your planned remarks for the presentation to **17-20 minutes**. This allows time for introductions, questions, discussion, and unanticipated delays. Research shows that longer presentations create more "cognitive backlog" or information that an audience is likely to forget. Sticking to 20 minutes keeps the audience engaged and makes it easier for the audience to retain and act on information.

   ▪ Keep the font size to a minimum of **30 points**. This helps to reduce the number of words on each slide and focus on words that matter.

   ▪ If developing a presentation with a team, **develop shared expectations** around the 10-20-30 rule so you will have less revising to do on the back end.

   ▪ **These are targets, not hard-and-fast rules.** They assume you have an hour for the presentation, questions, and discussion. However, it is important to consider your audience, the time allotment, and presentation delivery mode (e.g., in-person, web-based) when determining the number of slides, time for presenting, and font size.

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4. **Choose story structures that lead with findings.**

   ▪ **Avoid the pyramid style of presentation (See Exhibit IV.I).** This is the default in most research presentations. If you follow this structure, you risk spending too much time upfront on the first four steps (i.e., introduction, why, what, how) instead of the findings that audiences want to hear. Remember, your audiences have questions. They've come to your presentation to find answers. Get them to their goals quickly.

   ▪ **An inverted pyramid style is preferable, especially for virtual settings.** This structure takes a page out of journalism where the leading paragraph is devoted to the headline and what matters most, and the remaining sections provide information in the order of importance. This format may be ideal for virtual presentations were there is a higher likelihood of attendees leaving early or multitasking towards the end of the presentation.

   ▪ **An hourglass structure may be ideal for in-person presentations.** This presentation style opens and closes with what matters most. Schwabish (2016) recommends this style because it grabs the audience's attention early on when they are most likely to be paying attention and concludes by reiterating the main takeaways to encourage retention. We think that advantage is more likely to hold for in-person presentations where audiences are more likely to stay till the end.

Exhibit IV.I. Presentation Structure

Source: Adapted from Schwabish (2016).

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Step 2: Develop content

1. **Start by outlining the presentation.**

   - **Use 7 index cards or post-it notes (or their online equivalents) to brainstorm and sequence the main components** (one each for the opening and closing statements and up to 5 for the intervening sections).

     — The limited space will force you to concisely articulate your main topics.
     — Being able to move the cards around will make it easier to visualize flow before you commit to writing out a script.
     — Adding a timestamp on each card will allow you to plan how you will use your time before you draft comments.

   - **Do not outline by excerpting from your report directly into a slide deck or a word document.** While quicker, this will lure you into the pyramid structure we discussed above.

   - **Spend time figuring out your opening statement.** Don't waste your opening sentences on introducing yourself and/or the goals of your organization. Instead, craft and share a compelling statement on the core elements of your presentation. (See Chapter III. Written Products: Writing for Impact on developing simple but compelling leads.) This is the hook that will grab the audience's attention when they are paying the most attention. For example: "Our study has direct implications for your work as workforce development practitioners. Today we are going to share five key findings and discuss the related action items you can implement to help improve the outcomes of the job seekers you serve."

   - **Craft your closing statement.** Presenters often sign off with a generic thank-you. Instead, use your final statement to highlight the importance of your findings and how they fit into the bigger picture.

   - **Then figure out up to 5 sections that will lie between the opening and closing.** Having more than five discrete topics can overload your audience. The advantage of thinking of your presentation in terms of sections is that you can swap them out or change the distribution of time you devote to each depending on different audiences' needs.

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2. **Write concisely.** The guidance we provide in Chapter III. Written Products: Writing for Impact on concise writing is just the starting point. To develop a presentation for easy viewing that follows the 10-20-30 rule you will need to cull words ruthlessly.
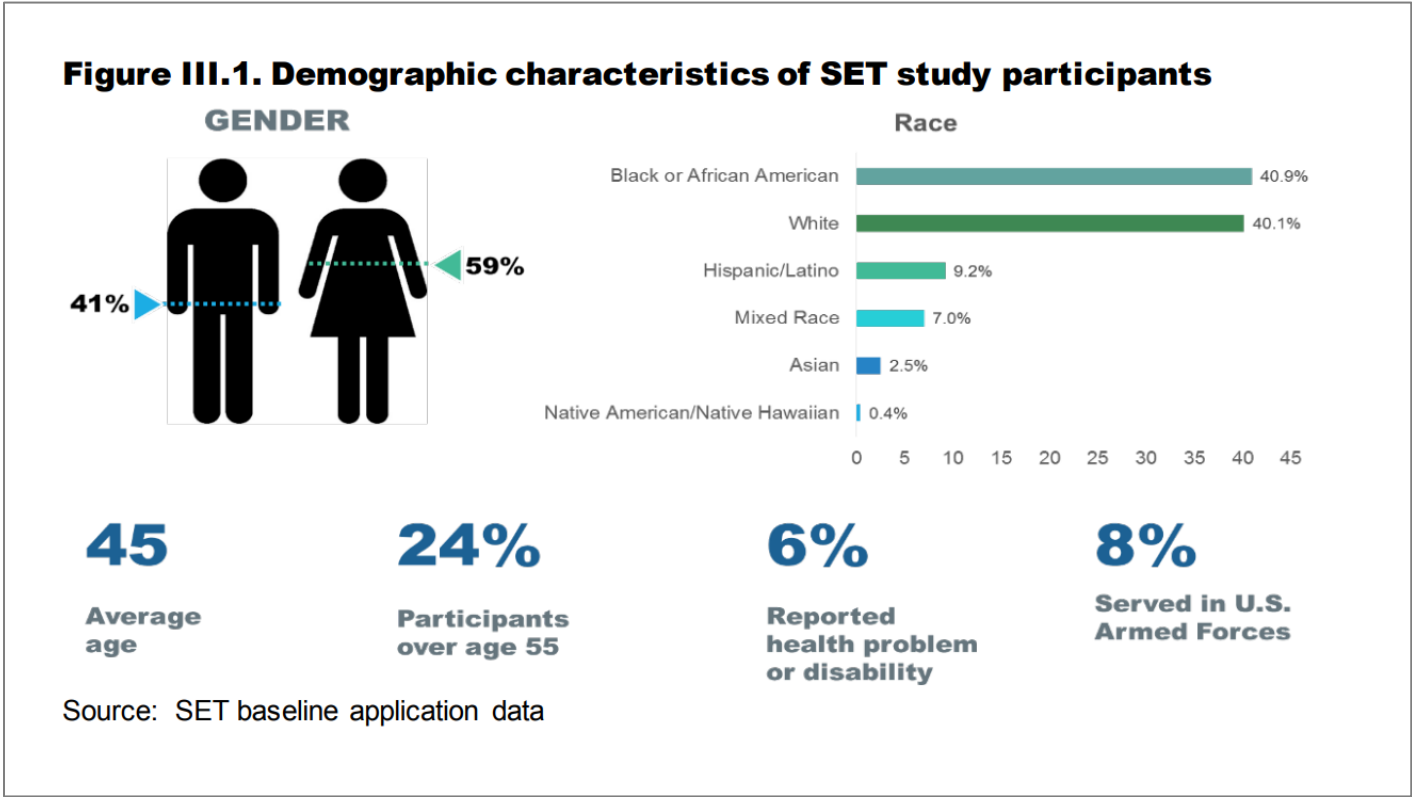
-ᗝ- *Bonus tip: Turn off the "autofit" function in PowerPoint to keep the font size consistent.*

- ▪ **Prepare the presentation to optimize the attention of the audience.** Having long, wordy text on slides (a) distracts the audience into reading rather than listening, (b) bores the audience since they can read faster than you can talk, and (c) tempts you to read from the slides. If needed, prepare annotated slides for those who might view it later.

- ▪ **Do not use complete sentences or articles (e.g., an, the).** You are using words to support, not replace, what you are saying. The words and visuals on the slide are there to prime the audience to listen carefully to what you will say and retain it.

3. **Use visuals** to convey and reinforce the content as well as limit the use of text. Visuals (including graphs and charts, infographics, pictures, and icons) can help make the presentation content more visually appealing and easier to digest. They can also aid the audience in recalling topics and concepts. See Exhibit IV.2 for a slide combining charts, smart art and text to summarize data insights.

- ▪ **Keep the visuals simple and intuitive** so that they are easy to read quickly.

- ▪ **Use charts and graphs only when they add value.** Otherwise, consider presenting only the key takeaways.

- ▪ **Use existing and free resources,** including icon libraries, smart art, and free images and art available under the National Gallery's Open Access Policy (see resources section).

- ▪ **Layer in elements one at a time** when telling a complex story. Use colors and font to help distinguish each layer (Exhibit IV.3).

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Exhibit IV.2. Using Diverse Visual Elements to Convey Data

Figure III.1. Demographic characteristics of SET study participants

Source: https://www.dol.gov/sites/dolgov/files/OASP/evaluation/pdf/SET_Pilot_Program_Implementation_Study_Report.pdf.

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Exhibit IV.3. Layering in Complex Elements, One at a Time

Source: AIR DOL Capacity Assessment Findings PPT (2022), developed by authors.

4. **Finalize the presentation through iteration.**

- ▪ **Edit down aggressively.** The first version will be wordy despite the guidance to write concisely. Exhibit IV.4 shows how much the final version of slides can evolve from the initial version.

- ▪ **Leave time to review, practice, and refine.** You will want to refine it again after you have practiced your delivery.

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Exhibit IV.4. Presentation Iteration Example

First Draft (Version 1): Text Heavy, no visual elements

Final draft (Version 4): Reduced text, heavy use of visuals and color

Source: Developed by authors.

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Step 3: Design to focus attention

1. **Declutter your presentation for easy reading.**

   - **Remove any distracting visual elements** built into the default template that do not aid understanding.

   - **Use drawing guides** to maintain symmetry.

   - **Consider using slide titles for the headline takeaway.** This keeps the attention of the audience on what you want them to remember. It also allows you to free up space for visuals.

2. **Use fonts to focus attention.**

   - **Use easy-to-read fonts** (e.g., use Arial rather than Blackadder ITC).

   - **Choose a large font size.** Decrease the spacing between lines of type if necessary.

   - **Use different-sized fonts for headings and subheadings** to help reinforce the hierarchy of thoughts.

3. **Use color to focus attention**.

   - **Use color to focus attention on the main data point** or to make salient words in a wall of text pop. (See Exhibit IV.5 below for an example. Chapter VI. Data Visualization provides further discussion on this topic).

   - **Keep the design and color scheme consistent** throughout the presentation. Use the slide sorter view to review for consistency in design and structure across slides.

   - **Use contrasting colors** (e.g., dark background, bright text) to focus attention.

4. **Limit transitions and animations.** Reserve these for specific purposes, such as showing the stages of a process.

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Exhibit IV.5. Using Color and Transitions to Focus Attention
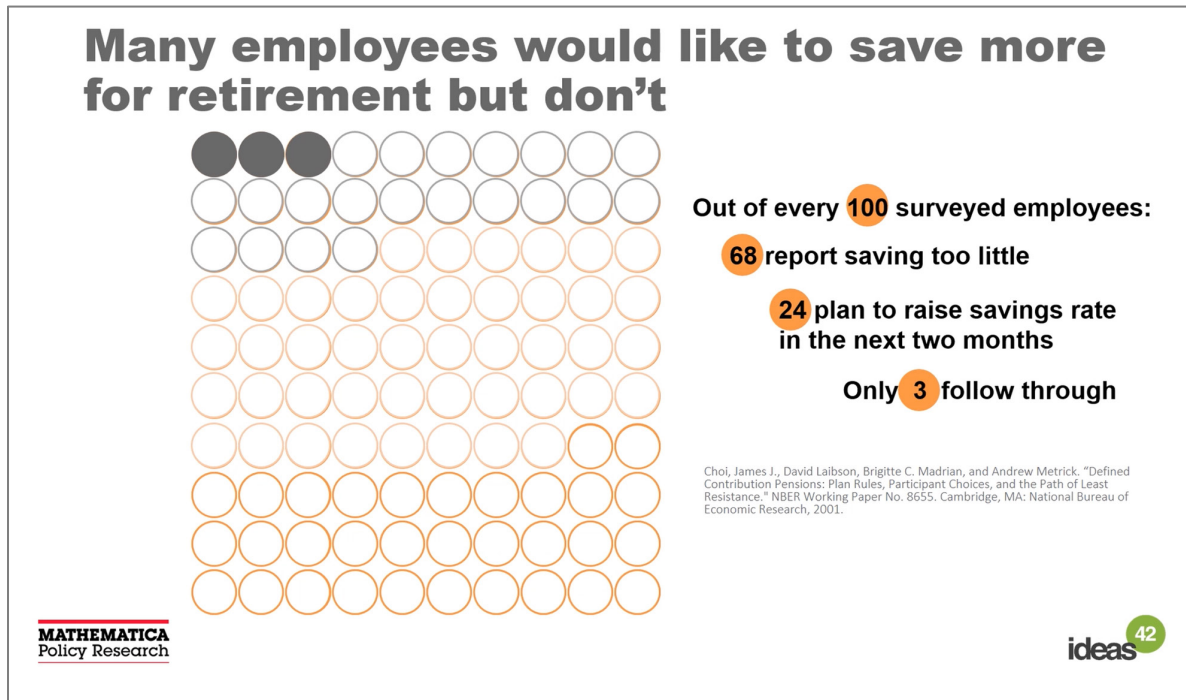
Source: https://www.dol.gov/sites/dolgov/files/OASP/legacy/files/3b_EBSA-narrated-video.zip.

Step 4: Deliver/Disseminate

1. **Develop a delivery plan.**

   - **Develop a script** to stay on message but do not memorize It verbatim.

   - **Practice delivery and timing** until you are not dependent on your written remarks.

   - **Distinguish between essential and "nice to have" content** in case you need to adjust in real time.

   - **Allow time for questions** and discussion with the audience.

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2. **Use an equity lens.**

  ▪ Make the presentation **accessible and inclusive.** See Chapter II. Planning for E2A Products and the Resources listed below for more information on accessible design.

  ▪ **Consider the abilities and special needs** of the audience when planning your delivery.

3. **Engage your participants.**

  ▪ **Identify opportunities for audience participation** throughout your presentation (see Exhibit IV.6).

  ▪ For virtual presentations, **consider using the chat feature and polls** to engage with the audience.

4. **Share slides with the audience for their review after delivering your presentation.**

Exhibit IV.6. Engagement Strategies

In-person
- Ask questions
- Facilitate discussions

Virtual
- Use the chat feature
- Poll the audience

Self-guided
- Use notes for guidance

Source: Developed by authors.

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☑ Presentations Checklist

❖ **Plan**

- ☐ Define your target audience.
- ☐ Specify what your target audience needs to know.
- ☐ Sketch out your story structure. If you are presenting findings from a report, consider how to shift report components around to tell a more compelling story.

❖ **Develop Compelling Content**

- ☐ Outline your presentation:
  - — Choose a story structure that leads with findings (inverted pyramid or hourglass).
  - — Write your opening and closing statements.
  - — Choose up to five sections that will support those statements.
- ☐ Draft your slides:
  - — Limit the amount of text.
  - — Use visuals to convey and reinforce messages.
  - — Follow the 10 substantive slides – 20 minutes of planned remarks – 30-point font rule.

❖ **Design to Focus Attention Design to Focus Attention**

- ☐ Use font and color to focus attention.
- ☐ Edit down text and declutter slides.

❖ **Delivery/Dissemination**

- ☐ Prepare for and practice a script until you don't need it.
- ☐ Identify "nice to have" content that you can skip if time is tight.
- ☐ Plan how you want to engage your audience.
- ☐ Share your slides with the audience after delivering your presentation.

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Resources

Presentation Guides

- Policy Viz Data Visualization Resources: https://policyviz.com/resources/

Color Palette Generators

- Coolors Color Palettes: https://coolors.co/

- Designs.AI Color Palettes: https://designs.ai/colors

Images

- Free art from the National Gallery's Open Access Policy: https://www.nga.gov/open-access-images.html

- Icon collections: https://policyviz.com/resources/icon-collections/

Design & Visual Aids

- Forbes. (2020, April 20). *Best Practices for Virtual Presentations: 15 Expert Tips that Work for Everyone.* https://www.forbes.com/sites/maryabbajay/2020/04/20/best-practices-for-virtual-presentations-15-expert-tips-that-work-for-everyone/?sh=730e684d3d19

- Virtual Speech. (2018, September 20). *Best Practices for Designing Presentation Slides.* https://virtualspeech.com/blog/designing-presentation-slides

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Accessibility

- Best Practices for Creating Accessible PowerPoints and Inclusive Presentations: https://www.jmu.edu/accessibility/_files/presentation-best-practices.pdf

- Best Practices for Making Power Point Presentations Accessible: https://support.microsoft.com/en-us/office/make-your-powerpoint-presentations-accessible-to-people-with-disabilities-6f7772b2-2f33-4bd2-8ca7-dae3b2b3ef25

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- Tips for Making Accessible PowerPoint Presentations for the Web:
  https://webaim.org/techniques/powerpoint/

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