LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Neuropathology: Art and Science

Abstract. So many examples of computer-designed (rather than human-designed) displays occurred at a recent meeting of the American Association of Neuropathologists that we were stimulated to develop simple guides to help improve presentation. Various color combinations provide examples of the best (and worst) contrast between the message and the medium (background).

Key Words: Color contrast; Illustrations; Lantern slides; Photographs.

As one of us remembers, change does not necessarily represent progress. In the “good old days,” gross and microscopic photography was an expensive art, so that at the early meetings of the American Association of Neuropathologists some 50 years ago, the lantern slides were sharp and stayed sharp (being glass-bound and 3.25 × 4.25 inches), and were visible whenever the wind died down and the shades could cover the windows to provide the necessary darkness. Of course, the typically sticky summer weather of the East Coast was only rarely accompanied by a breeze so that we continuously dripped sweat and alternately saw something or nothing on the screen. Fond memories, indeed, of the penthouse of the old Claridge Hotel or the screened porch of the old Marlborough-Blenheim Hotel in Atlantic City! Tables and text were rarely projected, as they were difficult to make into lantern slides, but since the text was typed (black) on transparent paper (usually yellow), the words were large enough to be easily legible at any distance.

At the most recent meeting, in our more luxurious hotel rooms, which had no problems with the heat, the lantern slides did not stay sharp (35 mm film buckles in the heat of the projector so that the projectionist has to refocus continually if we are to read anything). But that frequently turns out to be the least of the problems, since the author’s typical choice of color for the text (black or red) on the background (dark blue or green), combined with the default computer mechanism (which reduced the image to the size of a small postage stamp in the middle of a vast expanse of background) makes them illegible at any distance.

It does seem strange, neuropathology being such a visual science with such a variety of colors in our special stains (not including the immune reactions, which are generally brown), that we seem not to consider the artistic, and especially the practical visual element, in our presentations, be they on screen or on posterboard. Figure 1 provides some examples of color contrasts and time-tested useful messages, without mentioning the difficulties that some of our color-blind members might encounter even in the best of circumstances. Of course, there are more elegant publications, such as those of Tufte (1–3), where art and content are more extensively analyzed.

However, some things do remain the same, even after 50 years: the overhead light illuminates the screen rather than the back of the room, the dimmer control for this light is behind the screen so that the projectionist has to waste time walking to and fro, the microphone does not pick up all of the words spoken, and the loudspeakers are misplaced just enough to create echoes if not dead spaces.

REFERENCES

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