Creating Handouts that Enhance Instruction

Introduction
Too often, handouts are treated like an afterthought or simply forgotten about altogether in the expectation that they will just get thrown away. When handouts are poorly designed, irrelevant after the course has ended, they will very likely be discarded. By contrast, quality handouts are used, ensure that lectures and demonstrations are remembered, and enhance overall classroom instruction.

Why Handouts?
Our mind processes new information at different speeds depending on the medium. In general, we think at much faster speeds than we process written information. Similarly, we read at faster speeds than we process spoken information.

You may ask why bother to speak at all when people can read so much faster? The answer is that as an instructor, you convey much more than words when you speak + more readily connect emotionally with a student than via writing- what you say resonates much more so than what a student reads. Text supports and expands ideas with details and applications. Graphics (charts, tables, diagrams, maps) complement both your lecture + handouts because they format information for rapid assimilation.

Experts conclude that students generally forget almost 90% of everything that is said to them within 24 hours. Handouts help your students to both recall + apply the details that tend to fade with time.

Reiterative or Interactive
Handout formats generally fall into one of two categories: Reiterative + Interactive. You should choose the type which best supports the objectives of your lecture.

A reiterative handout restates your material and includes items such as a lecture outline, fact + data sheets, case studies, articles + white papers, charts, copy of visuals used, bibliography.
An interactive handout encourages assimilation of your material via hands-on activities and includes items such as worksheets, checklists, pathfinders + guides, decision trees, flow charts, diagrams + tables, action plans.

**Developing the Effective Handout**

Now that you know that the handout is essential for audience understanding, you need to understand that it is also one of the biggest sources of distraction during the lecture. How can we use handouts effectively in a lecture?

Ideally, tell your students at the beginning of the presentation that they will receive a complete handout on the lecture/demo at the end and follow through with that plan. Realistically, this often can’t happen because the reason for the handout is to assist the students in understanding the content of your lecture. They may need it while you are speaking. Assuming this is the case, here are some tips on how to best use the handout during the lecture so there is minimum distraction.

**Distribution**

Only distribute materials that are needed at a given place in the presentation/demo. Handing out materials in sections will limit the students from perusing parts of the handout that do not relate to what you are discussing. This method can also help in keeping the students listening to you instead of daydreaming or thinking of their own plans.

**Color-coding**

Color-code materials which you want the students to examine. Tell them to go immediately to the part underlined in blue, for example, possibly identifying the coded material by page number. Usually students will do what you tell them, especially if the directions are very specific and prescriptive.

**Fill in the blanks**

Include in the handout blanks for students to complete. If students see a blank on a handout they will listen so they can write in the answer.

**Effective Handouts - summary**

As stated, effective handouts are an integral part of lectures, so their design, use, and distribution require careful planning.

Ask yourself why you are using handouts.
Do you want to -
- Add supporting data, summaries + reading lists?
- Reiterate your message?
- Engage your student’s participation?
- Help your students remember your message?
- Give your students a way to recreate the material in the future?

To make your handouts more effective, follow these simple rules:

1. **The key to well-designed handouts is SIMPLICITY.**
   - Focus on the key words and concepts of your lecture.
   - Distill each point into a clear summary. Avoid unnecessary details. You want students to glance at your handout as you speak, not to get so absorbed in it that they tune you out.
   - Use illustrations or graphics, if appropriate.
   - Leave room for notes.

2. **Relate the handout to your lecture.**
   - Make each point listed in your handout correspond to a point in your lecture.
   - Number each point in the handout so students can follow along as you say, “My first point is...” If you jump around, you will cause your students to spend their time trying to figure out where on the handout you are.

3. **Make your handout appealing to the eye.**
   - Leave plenty of white space, break major points into smaller chunks, and vary its look.
   - Avoid using too many fonts or styles.

4. **Don’t let the handout distract your students.**
   - Students concentrate on one line of thought at a time. If you give them something to read that doesn’t match the content + style of your talk, they will cut themselves off from one in order to follow another.
   - Design the handout to represent the content and spirit of your lecture.

5. **Know when to distribute your handout.**
   - If your material is very complex, give it to your students before your lecture. Let them read it before you begin speaking.
- If you have lots of content, consider breaking it up into a number of handouts + distributing them throughout your lecture. Doing so keeps your students from reading ahead + losing interest in what you’re saying.
- If your handout is primarily a means of reminding your students of your key points, distribute them at the end of your lecture.

Example | 1
- excerpt from course syllabus | Adobe Flash

Session 2 | Oct 14
- Lecture Topics —
  - Path Tool Handout - [link to PDF]
  - Flash Shortcuts —
    - Handout | Basic Panel Keyboard Shortcuts - [link to PDF]
    - Handout | Drawing and Color Tool Shortcuts - [link to PDF]
    - Handout | Modifying and Editing Shortcuts - [link to PDF]
  - Online Resources —
    - Videos [hyperlink]
    - Tutorials [hyperlink]
  - Drawing in Flash: A Beginner's Introduction to the Flash Drawing Tools by Michele Howley
  - Reading —
    - Flash Graphic Effects Learning Guide by Jen DeHann
  - Readings
    - Chapter 2, p. 19 - 26
    - Chapter 3, p. 42 - 57