

Know When and When Not to Use Charts and Graphs

By Dianna Booher

Charts and graphs are both the message and the medium. Correctly used as a message, they displace text and explain ideas better than words themselves—simplifying, clarifying, and summarizing. As a medium, charts and graphs highlight key points and create high-impact pictures that remain in the reader's memory.

Many people "digest" a report simply by reading the abstract or executive summary and then by looking at the tables and figures. If readers can grasp the important ideas with such little effort, why shouldn't they? Why should they have to read tedious textual passages when they can understand the significant information with a quick glance at a graphic presentation? Visuals require much less conceptualizing time from the reader.

An additional benefit of charts and graphs is that they make facts or statistics more explicit and memorable by showing relationships. They tell readers how to interpret the data—what the facts or numbers mean.

Consider the impact of graphics this way: How effective would advertisers be if they presented their new products by rolling paragraphs of text across the TV screen?

On the other hand, some writers approach the question of charts and graphs haphazardly and wind up adding far too many, simply because they find them easy to create with their favorite software package.

Use the following checklist to cull unnecessary graphics from your documents:

- Does the chart or graph emphasize trivial or irrelevant information?
- Can the information be included in another graphic without cluttering it?
- Does the information confuse rather than clarify?
- Has the information already been included simply and emphatically in the text?

Always ask yourself: Can a chart or graph replace a thousand words? If so, use it.

Visuals save reading time, simplify text, make abstract terms understandable, emphasize key points, summarize facts and trends, and present ideas creatively so that readers remember them.

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*For more on technical writing, see **E-Writing: 21st-Century Tools for Effective Communication (Simon & Schuster/Pocket Books)** by Dianna Booher.*