

# Designing persuasive tables and charts

Bad data graphics can be expensive, if not fatal. This article explains how to design readable data graphics for your audience. **By Sally Bigwood and Melissa Spore**

The 1986 space shuttle Challenger tragedy in which seven astronauts died was caused, in part, by bad data graphics. By bad, we mean visuals that did not communicate the intended message. Because NASA officials did not understand vital information, the launch decision was ill-informed and the outcome catastrophic. The question we address is what lead experienced engineers to commit such a grave error? The answers are relevant for anyone in the business of communicating technical information for decision making with important outcomes. In dramatic situations, badly communicated technical information can cost lives. More routinely, it degrades decision making and lowers performance.

We will come back to the Challenger tragedy but let us begin by saying incommunicative data graphics are surprisingly common. We have come across innumerable examples in the past five years. This is puzzling given that tables and graphs only summarise basic data.

Technical publications usually avoid the more grotesque graphic mistakes of the popular press, yet, as the Challenger story suggests, engineers and scientists are not immune. Technical communicators face at least four problems. Firstly, the principles of data graphics are rarely taught or even talked about among professionals, forcing most technical communicators to work out solutions for themselves. Secondly, the evidence base for presenting data graphics is sadly small and diverse. Finding reliable advice is not easy. Thirdly, clients, colleagues and others frequently misunderstand what makes a good graphic – myths and misunderstandings abound. Finally, designing readable data graphics is time consuming and this is often unappreciated by others.

This paper is based on good practice recommendations by experts (see bibliography). Our own objective is to encourage data to be readable and designed for the convenience of the intended audience. In this paper 'data graphics' encompasses tables and graphs, while

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'graph' is shorthand for bar, line and pie charts. We develop our argument and offer advice under two headings: popular misconceptions and neglect of wording.

## Popular misconceptions

Unsupported ideas and faulty logic about data graphics are now part of public consciousness. The public has remarkably low expectations of numeric information: obscure and indecipherable tables or graphs never surprise them. Too many numerate professionals feed this confusion either intentionally or negligently. Accountants, for instance, sometimes present basic financial figures in unnecessarily complex and discouraging ways. Such poor communication borders on incompetence. To create lucid, intelligible data graphics, we suggest the following:

**Reduce the data** Designing useful data graphics requires decision-making, judging what data is relevant, and what can be ignored. Too much data swamps, confuses and misleads. Think of the needs of your readers. Provide selective, edited demonstration tables – focusing on a specific point – rather than comprehensive tables. Similarly, graphs should focus on an explicit story.

**Present refined thought** Persuasive data graphics are the product of time and thought. Serious communicators need time to analyse the data and design it appropriately for the intended audience. A resulting table or graph may look simple (like Illustration 1) but is the result of knowledge, experience and commitment to communicating with others.

**Don't overestimate graphs** Graphs are fundamentally simple. Bar graphs show that one thing is larger than another, lines show changes over time and pies show the parts of a whole. Graphs that look complex almost always do so because of over-elaborate presentation, not intellectual rigor. The fact is, graphs can not explain complex messages and complex graphs do

not communicate effectively. Compare the simplicity and persuasiveness of Illustration 1 with the vague, indecisiveness of Illustration 2.

**Use a table** Saying the public prefers graphs to tables is like saying someone prefers a hammer to a saw. Both are useful tools but they do different jobs. Graphs excel at a single storyline, at high contrasts and broad trends; they are less good at detail. Tables are more versatile and can present complex stories. Additionally tables hold detail conveniently and, when well designed, are easy to read. Yet communicators are sometimes pressurised into using graphs when a table is appropriate. People who are interested in your subject will be interested in relevant, readable data however presented.

**Remove debris** Gratuitous decoration – data labels, gridlines, shading, borders, tick marks, embolding, etc. – detracts from the message. Emphasise the data, not the decoration. To make your tables and graphs authoritative, keep them simple, small and stripped of clutter. Look at *The Economist*: it serves a highly numerate, serious readership and illustrates articles with small, succinct data graphics with scarcely a gridline or data label in sight.

**Steer clear of pie charts and 3-d graphs** The public may like pie charts but they force readers into the mental juggling of comparing triangles arranged in a circle. Most of us think linearly and a simple bar chart presents this data more conveniently. Equally, 3-d graphs may be popular but they tend to distort data – readers do not know which point of the image they should measure from. Avoid them.

## Neglect of wording

A Picasso and Leonardo may speak for itself but data graphics need words. Inadequate, obscure or unreadable wording is a frequent cause of tables and graphs being incomprehensible. Neglect the surrounding text in a graph and readers

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will walk away befuddled or, worse, confident in their misinterpretation. Here is some advice:

## Make graphics self-explanatory

Readers should not have to refer to the text to understand what the data graphics is about. Obscure abbreviations, jargon and inadequate labelling is common (even in technical journals) and off putting to readers. Keep lettering horizontal and large enough to read. Label all axes.

## Use the title to reinforce a graph's message

The best graph titles introduce, summarise and re-enforce its message, for instance, as in Illustration 1, "The numbers completing IT training has fallen every year Total of Teams A, B & C". If you can't summarise your graph in a short sentence or phrase, it's probably because the content is too complex to be a successful graph. Look at Illustration 2 - it can not be captured into a single phrase because it has no single story to tell; it is not a good graph – it does not communicate with ease.

**Avoid key legends** Keys or legends on graphs demand that readers look at two things at once. Label bars, lines and pie slices directly for the convenience of readers.

## Conclusion

What went wrong with the Challenger? The evening before take-off, engineers involved in the design of the Challenger tried to alert NASA officials that the unseasonably cold weather might damage some of the parts. To persuade NASA to delay the launch, the engineers drew up 13 visuals. NASA remained unconvinced, the rocket was launched and exploded after only 73 seconds. A full analysis can be read in Edward R. Tufte in *Visual Explanations*. He shows that the tragedy arose because of the engineers' failure to communicate with decision makers. In particular, a combination of poor selection of data and poor presentation of data fatally reduced the persuasiveness of their warning. The engineers failed to think through what information would persuade their audience and how to present it effectively.

Of course, few table or graphs contribute to deaths but they frequently lead to confusion, time wasting and poor decision-

making. To persuade your audience, invest time in learning to become proficient in expressing numeric ideas as simply as possible. Select and reduce data, showing only what's relevant for readers. Choose an appropriate, effective display. Strip tables and graphs of clutter and ensure the text is coherent and readable. Above all, make a personal commitment to presenting the data for the convenience of the reader.

## References

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British Standard 7581: *The presentation of tables and charts* 1992

Ehrenberg, A.S.C. *A Primer in Data Reduction*, John Wiley & Son, 1986

Tufte, Edward R: *The Visual Display of Quantitative Information* The Graphics Press (USA) 1993

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Illustration 1 ✓ Persuasive graphs focus on a simple, explicit story

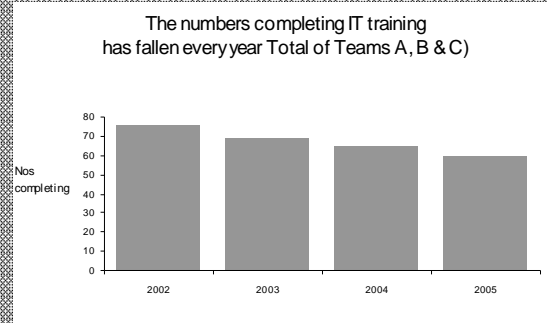
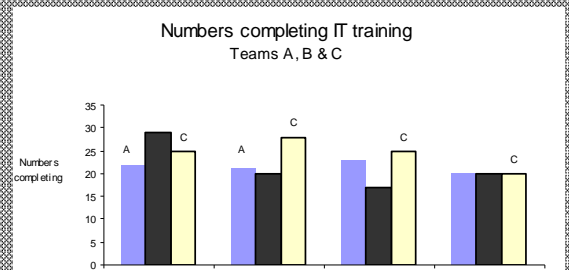


Illustration 2 ✗ Graphs trying to present more than one idea tend to be vague and indecisive



## Sally Bigwood

- is a consultant specialising in data presentation and runs a business called Plain Figures. She has over twenty years experience working in the public and private sector in the UK and the USA. E-mail: [sbigwood@plainfigures.com](mailto:sbigwood@plainfigures.com) website: [www.plainfigures.com](http://www.plainfigures.com)

## Melissa Spore

- is an instructional designer at the University of Saskatoon in Canada. She and Sally Bigwood wrote *Presenting Numbers, Tables & Charts*, published by Oxford University Press in 2003. E-mail: [Melissa.Spore@extfc.usask.ca](mailto:Melissa.Spore@extfc.usask.ca)