

# Create compelling infographics

**M**ANY JOURNALISTS seem to have a love/hate relationship with infographics.

On one hand, snazzy graphics replacing good old-fashioned word-smithing rubs a lot of us the wrong way. Sometimes the drive to produce clever imagery can even result in the distortion of data, perhaps going so far as to mislead readers. And let's face it: Some stories just can't be stripped of their critical text and forced into nice, neat images. Words do matter.

On the other hand, there's no doubt that the rise in popularity of infographics isn't slowing down any time soon. Many readers gravitate toward them — especially if they're clear, concise and visually appealing — and no one can deny the speed in which eye-catching data visualization can convey even the most complex of messages. What might have taken pages to explain (with readers who give up half-way through), might now be presented in a mere snapshot, engaging readers and informing them at the same time.

Rather than dismissing these forms of information delivery systems as traitors to good journalism or merely a quick replacement for solid reporting, we can learn to embrace infographics and incorporate them into our digital repertoire by adopting some best practices.

## WHAT ARE YOU TRYING TO SAY?

Effective infographics convey information that can be easily and coherently presented in visual form. Sometimes it's about emphasizing specific numbers, statistics or trends; other times it's about zooming out to see the larger picture.

Before you decide infographics should be part of your storytelling process, assess what data you want to highlight and evaluate whether visualizing the content is the most effective treatment.

If your story centers on intricate comparisons or multiple data sets, translating this information into visuals, diagrams and maps might be a great way to intelligibly convey your content. However, if your story is a feature, or explores a subject less rooted in numbers and more about descriptive analysis, data visualization might not serve you as well as using well-written, exploratory verbiage.

## PREP THE DATA

Before any visualization can be created to inform an infographic, your data must be solid, thorough and organized in the most fluid and manageable way possible. In other words, because readers will be digesting information in essentially bite-sized visual nuggets, as journalists, we must gather the data and arrange it in a way that will translate into visuals as easily as possible.

Divide your story into categorized sections, highlight-

ing the numbers, statistics or lists that really matter. Do the same for major themes or viewpoints you want to focus on. This will help initially arrange the content so it can be transferred to visual form as efficiently as possible, without minimizing its significance. Remember, infographics are a form of visual shorthand, so distilling the information — without losing its potency or the context within which the content operates — is a good way to prepare the data for visual transformation.

## BEWARE STYLE OVER SUBSTANCE

It's easy to be drawn to slick, stylish fonts and flashy layouts, but it's important to remember that compelling content is the real driving force behind effective visualizations. The best infographics are easy to read, present information clearly and logically, and direct the reader's eye from one section to the next in a coherent, fluid motion. The last thing you want to do is confuse your audience by forcing them to jump from one section to the next without any sensible order or rationale.

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A good rule to work by for infographics: less is more. You're already saying what you need to say in a condensed composition, so don't work against that objective by busy-ing it up with lots of extraneous imagery.

## TOOLS

If you can work with a graphic artist or designer to create these, all the better. Many times, creative professionals can help you translate your content into captivating visual representations that encourage readers to compare and contrast essential data sets that might otherwise have gotten lost within a text-heavy story.

However, there are many tools you can use to create engaging infographics easily and without a ton of graphic experience. Piktochart, Venngage, Easel.ly and Infogr.am are just a few. They're simple to use, offer a multitude of templates and even suggest ideas on how to best visually interpret your content.

Infographics don't have to be the wordsmith journalist's enemy. If used thoughtfully, they can help tell complex stories simply, invite readers to explore the matter logically, and encourage journalists to become better visual storytellers. ❖



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