

Improving visual impact

Visual displays support text and provide a representation of what is being discussed. They can break up long slabs of text, add visual appeal to a publication or website and engage users.

Following a few key tips can help to improve the impact and effectiveness of your visuals.

Reduce clutter

The message or data must shine through your visual display. It should therefore be the most prominent and legible item in your display. Reducing clutter can help to achieve this.

Remove citations, caveats, logos, background shading, borders, and other nonrelevant graphic elements from the display, wherever possible.

Reduce 'ink on the page' and pay attention to the data:ink ratio ([Tufte 2001](#)). This means:

- reducing the nondata ink by using dotted or hashed lines for nondata elements, such as grid lines, arrows, borders and shading (while still considering accessibility requirements)
- increasing the data ink by making key points bold or of higher contrast.

Use colour wisely

Be restrained with the use of colour. A single splash of strong colour to highlight a key point is often more powerful and effective than colouring the entire table or figure.

When applying colour, be aware that some colours can carry meaning, such as green for good, go or environment; and red for bad, stop, warning or heat. Look for opportunities to use colour meaningfully, and be careful not to imply meaning where there is none. Colours also create a psychological response – bright colours are exciting, energetic and attract attention, whereas pale colours are soothing and receding.

Ensure appropriate sizing

Resize or redraw the figure to fit the layout of the publication. Make sure that critical parts of the figure are presented at an appropriate scale for legibility. Ensure that any text is legible. If possible, use a sans serif font at 9 pt (minimum 7 pt) at the size the figure will be used in the layout.

Ensure consistency

Be consistent with styling for all visual displays throughout your publication. Standardise common elements across similar figures (e.g. appearance of legends, data elements, axes, typography, borders, colours, line styles).

Make sure that comparable information is displayed in equivalent formats (e.g. don't show one year's dataset in a line graph and the same dataset for a different year in a bar graph). Graphs that are to be compared with each other should also have comparable scales and categories, and consistent styling.

Ensure understanding

Consider adding direct labels or a contrasting colour to highlight key points in figures if this might assist user comprehension.

Text in a figure can be rotated, preferably to 30°, 45° or 90°, but never set vertically (i.e. with letters the right way up but set underneath each other).

Use the text to point to key messages

It is good practice to discuss the key points of a figure and then direct the user with an in-text reference, rather than just announcing the graph. This highlights the message directly, and makes the text more active and interesting:

[Australian house sizes have increased rapidly over the past 50 years \(Table 1.1\).](#)

not

[Table 1.1 shows the average house sizes for Australia's capital cities from 1960 to 2010.](#)

In some cases, it may be appropriate to highlight the key message in the graph title. This is not generally done in academic journals or more formal publications, but can be a valuable technique in many publications, especially for general audiences.