Making effective infographics

Infographics combine text and visuals to communicate information. An effective infographic is clear and engaging: clear means it is accurate and easy to understand; engaging means it sparks understanding, interest and action in the audience. An effective infographic means the audience says, 'Now I get it!'

Types of infographics

'Infographic' is a broad term. Understanding the different types is the first step to making a clear and effective infographic:

- Data infographic – used to show interesting data when a graph is not engaging enough or cannot capture enough aspects of the data. These can be further divided into
  - dashboards, where various numbers and facts are grouped, and illustrated by icons to make the content more engaging
  - displays, where data is translated into a relevant picture, such as trees of various sizes to show regeneration in different areas.
- Process infographic – used to explain how a process or stages of a project work.
- Message infographic – used to help readers understand an idea or concept.

Use an infographic when:

- the topic is inherently visual (e.g. fish identification chart)
- describing a complex process (e.g. car repair manual)
- describing an interconnected system (e.g. ecology)
- the content should be 'omnilingual' (e.g. appliance instructions)
- you need to engage the reader immediately by offering something interesting to look at
- you need something less daunting than a page of text.

Don't use an infographic when:

- 1 well-made figure or sentence is enough
- the topic needs the precision and detail only words can give (e.g. caveats, definitions)
- 'infographic' is being used as a buzzword
- what is really needed is more engaging overall design.

How to create an effective infographic

Making effective infographics is an iterative process, involving a subject matter expert, a writer or editor and a designer working together.

Stage 1 – gather information

The first part of creating an effective infographic is to understand the context. This includes:

- the aim – what do you want to infographic to achieve? How will you know if it's successful?
- the audience – who needs to understand it? Experts? Decision makers? Kids? Families?
- how the infographic will be used – how will people view it – webpage, report, presentation?
- your capabilities and resourcing – do you have the capabilities inhouse or will you outsource?

Stage 2 – find the story

Getting the story right is crucial to making an effective infographic. Identify your key message – the most important message that you want your audience to understand and remember. You can include other supporting information, but identifying your key message will help you to focus your design. You should be able to sum your message up in 1 clear, punchy sentence.

Stage 3 – map the visual structure

Sketch or describe the visual features that will best communicate your message, such as a visual metaphor, a flowchart, illustrations or graphs.

Visual metaphors can be a powerful structure for infographics. Metaphors are used in language to convey a message; for example, 'the early bird catches the worm'. Thinking of your message as a metaphor can prompt ideas for effective visuals, especially for complex or abstract messages.

There's no magic formula to developing a concept; you just need to think about things. Brainstorming with colleagues or users can help.
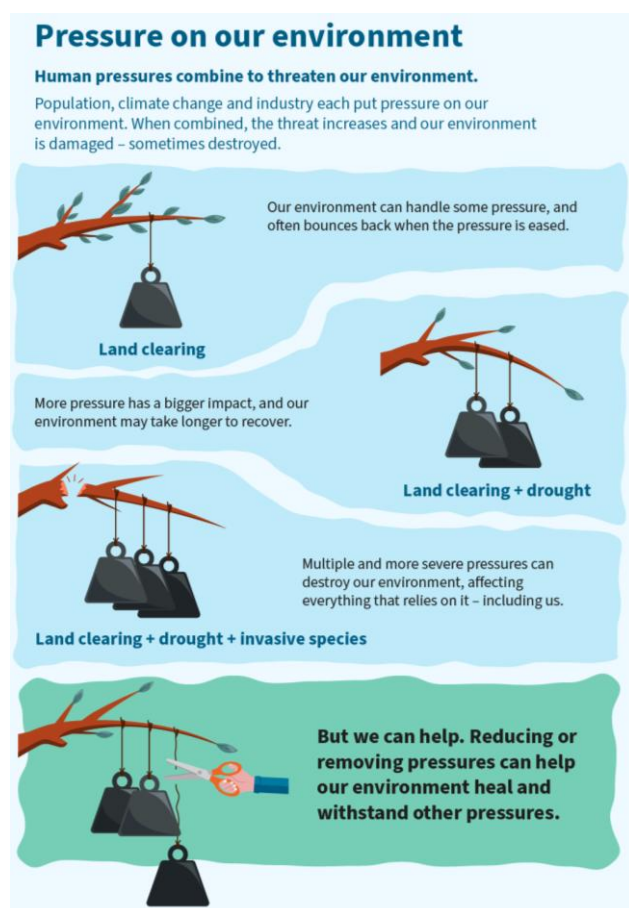
Stage 4 – test your ideas

After you have refined some ideas, produce rough concepts to test with others. This will help you see how effective your approach is at communicating your message and spot any aspects that might confuse your audience.

Stage 5 – draft the design

Work with a designer to turn the sketch into a draft infographic. The choice of design elements such as fonts, colours, graphic elements, illustrations, white space and layout of text and visuals on the page will all convey information.

Stage 6 – refine and finalise the design

You will probably need several iterations to test and refine the infographic. The designer can then produce final files to suit your purpose.

Pressure on our environment

Human pressures combine to threaten our environment.

Population, climate change and industry each put pressure on our environment. When combined, the threat increases and our environment is damaged – sometimes destroyed.

Our environment can handle some pressure, and often bounces back when the pressure is eased.

Land clearing

More pressure has a bigger impact, and our environment may take longer to recover.

Land clearing + drought

Multiple and more severe pressures can destroy our environment, affecting everything that relies on it – including us.

Land clearing + drought + invasive species

But we can help. Reducing or removing pressures can help our environment heal and withstand other pressures.

An eye-tracking test for the national *State of the environment* report showed that infographics really capture users' attention: the 'dwell time' – how long users spent looking at something – was more than 10 times greater for infographics than for text.

Common infographic pitfalls

Below are some common mistakes that lead to ineffective infographics, and tips to overcome them.

- **Too many messages.** The most common problem we see with infographics is an attempt to cover all aspects and details of the topic. This makes the infographic cluttered, and buries the key message. Instead, identify the key message you want your audience to understand, and focus on that. This might mean leaving out some details, or simplifying complex ideas or breaking them down into several parts or steps.
- **Unclear message.** It's easy to fall into the trap of wanting an infographic to enliven your work without thinking about what you want to say or what the infographic is supposed to achieve. This is a recipe for poor infographics. Summarise your key message in writing before you start planning your infographic.
- **Too much text.** Reading large blocks of text slows the reader's interaction with the infographic and weakens the overall message. Brief, effective text that is well matched to the graphics works better. Extra details can always be added to accompanying text.
- **One infographic when several are needed.** Breaking down a complex idea into separate panels, or even separate infographics, can improve understanding. This is useful if the message is actually a bundle of separate ideas. It's also useful if you find yourself hoping for 'one summary infographic'. Such an infographic can be impossibly complicated, and you may need to either simplify the message or come up with a linked set of infographics.
- **Trying to be too close to real life.** Sometimes experts want icons or graphics to show an object that looks exactly like 'the real thing'. This can make it difficult for audiences to interpret, as people can often more quickly and readily recognise a cartoon icon of an object than a real-life drawing of the same object. Visuals and icons don't need to be realistic to prompt the audience to think of a certain thing – for example, younger computer users recognise the 'save' symbol in many computer applications even though they may never have used a floppy disk.