

Bring information and data to life with a well-thought-out visual.

Infographic Tips and Tools

BY MIKE PARKINSON

Infographics are a valuable training tool. Unfortunately, most educational infographics fail because they are a collection of random content, data, and icons with no clear message or story. The infographic's information and imagery often is selected based on convenience and not the learning objectives. For example, the author of an unsuccessful infographic may include easy-to-find, loosely related statistics accompanied by free, incongruent icons and symbols found on the web. The result is a confusing, unprofessional visual that fails to teach the audience.

The following tips and infographic tools make it much easier to turn your words, data, and ideas into infographics that engage and educate.



Define it

What does the term “infographic” mean to you? Define it. A clear understanding of what is being created ensures you stay on the right path and do not add superfluous content and imagery inconsistent with your message.

According to Google, an infographic is “a visual image such as a chart or diagram used to represent information or data.” The infographic style of the day combines quantitative data, explanatory text, and aesthetically flat icons. This definition and modern aesthetic is a great start, but limits our choices. As educators, we want to use every option available to accomplish our task. For this reason, we should broaden the definition of an infographic to “a visual that clarifies and explains.” Widening our view of what an infographic can be and increasing our stylistic options to include more graphic types improves the likelihood of success.

An infographic can be as simple as a picture or as complex as a dashboard graphic containing multiple graphic types such as pie charts, bar charts, and maps. As long as the imagery effectively clarifies or explains the subject matter, it is an informational graphic.

For example, if the goal of the infographic is to explain how to assemble a chair, then quantitative information, ornate fonts, or decorative iconography are not needed. A schematic with simple instructions accompanying an image of the chair will be successful. In this case, the schematic clarifies or explains assembly instructions.

It is acceptable to define an infographic differently as long as it helps you achieve your goals. Forcing learning objectives and content into an infographic style you found on the web because it looked “cool” often results in failure. Achieve your objectives by setting parameters consistent with your learning objectives.

Concept before rendering

Start with the title, which is the purpose of the infographic. Next, sketch the content needed to communicate this title. It doesn’t matter if the graphic looks like a toddler drew it. Develop your ideas without boundaries. Give yourself permission to make mistakes, erase, scribble, and redraw images. No design skill is needed at this point. Capture your thoughts as rough designs to pick the best path forward.

The goal of sketching is to be as creative as needed to accomplish your task without boundaries imposed by software. Relying on software to conceptualize an infographic forces a fit when one isn’t there.

For example, a trainer may use a tool such as PowerPoint SmartArt to design an infographic because it is quick and easy. However, limiting your choices to what is found in your tool of choice is unwise. Sketching on paper enables you to determine whether a process diagram or a building block graphic better fits your concept—making it more memorable to your audience.

Make it easy

When concepting, consider what you want the audience to learn from your training session. What are the takeaways? For example, if you are teaching authors how to self-publish a novel, what do they need to know? Break down the process into bite-sized chunks. If needed, ask a subject matter expert and distill the information into the component parts.

Next, list the phases in a step-by-step graphic. Your goal is to make it easy for the learner to understand, remember, and use the knowledge shared in the infographic. Implementing this step takes more time during the concepting phase, but the finished visual will deliver the intended results.

Use the right tools for rendering

When possible, use an experienced designer. A graphic designer will do it better, faster, and for a lower total cost than you. Leverage their expertise to deliver a powerful infographic.

When you do not have the option of

Helpful Resources

Graphic Cheat Sheet

To pick the best graphic type for your content use my Graphic Cheat Sheet (<http://billiondollargraphics.com/graphic-cheat-sheet>).

Sticky Notes

Write key elements on sticky notes and then assemble those pieces of paper to tell an easy-to-follow story or flow. Include imagery such as icons and symbols as desired—as long as it is relevant to the goal of your infographic.

Free and Low-Cost Infographic Websites

There are several websites optimized for rendering infographics. I recommend Canva.com, piktochart.com, and infogr.am. There are many websites, including istockphoto.com, fotolia.com, and dreamstime.com, where you can find imagery such as photographs and icons. For PowerPoint graphics, try GetMyGraphics.com and PresentationLoad.com.

Color Pickers

Use the following websites to help you pick harmonious color palettes for your infographics: Color.Adobe.com, ColorScheme Designer.com, ColorExplorer.com, and ColourLovers.com.

working with a designer, select rendering tools and resources optimized for infographics. I recommend the Adobe Suite; however, the learning curve is steep. Alternatively, there are several free and low-cost online design tools that require no design experience. Try different tools and select one or more that work best for your platform.

All design choices must have a purpose

Good design is driven by the purpose of your infographic. Experienced designers know aesthetic choices affect the likelihood of success; therefore, all aesthetic decisions must support the

goal of the graphic. For example, color has been proved to positively affect memory. The color palette you choose can improve retention—or give your audience a headache.

When in doubt, use the KISS principle: Keep it simple, silly. Do not use unnecessary visual embellishment. Avoid using too many colors, fonts, and styles. Avoid saturated complementary colors (colors across from another on the color wheel such as a vibrant red and green) and use one font family.

Validate

Send your infographic to a trusted

colleague and ask him if he understands it. Do not explain your content to ensure unbiased feedback. Ask open-ended questions such as, “What did you learn?” to avoid influencing your colleague’s input. Adjust your infographic based on the feedback.

Turning words, data, and ideas into infographics requires an upfront time investment, but the benefits to the learners far outweigh the effort. When done right, infographics improve understanding, recollection, and adoption.

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