Script: Infographics
Faculty Member:

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An infographic is a visual representation of factual information. Facts, of course, are key, but the two most important words here are "visual representation." In other words…

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…the best infographics show things, rather than simply telling things that can be explained in text.

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A good infographic is basically the result of a simple formula: USEFUL INFORMATION combined with GOOD DESIGN makes for an awesome graphic.

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Notice that I also could have arranged our simple formula this way. The first one was easier to copy while typing. But this way is more visual and probably easier for you to remember. In other words, it's better designed because it uses a visual arrangement to organize the information in a helpful way.

Unfortunately, USEFUL INFORMATION and GOOD DESIGN are not always simple. Further complicating the world of infographics is another component we should add to this formula…

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That other component is smart thinking. It's the smart thinking about how to combine information and visual display that leads to the best graphics. We'll come back to the thinking part in a minute…. but first…

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Let's make sure the information in your graphic will indeed be useful…

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Above all, information should be worth visualizing. If the material easily -- and just as effectively -- could be explained with words or a block of text, then it's not really going to make for a good infographic. Fight the urge to simply decorate text with icons or illustrations. Although that can make things visual, it's a weak substitute for an actual infographic.

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Second, a graphic requires more information than a text story. For example, it's OK in a story to say an accident happened at the corner of Ninth and Elm streets. But to create a map or diagram of the situation, you might need the exact direction each car was traveling or details on how they hit each other. Likewise,

two data points usually don't merit a whole chart, since it's more efficient to just explain the difference between the numbers within the main story.

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Next, information needs to come from a reliable source. Official dot-gov websites are pretty reliable. Everything else found on the Internet should be scrutinized to make sure the data are indeed legitimate.

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Finally, graphics often are created simply because a reporter has the data, but the information itself might not be all that necessary to understand the story. In that case, it can actually be confusing to the readers as they try to figure out why they're looking at a chart that doesn't show something relevant.

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Infographics can be a challenge because along with the journalism, they require some design skill as well.

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Although design training certainly helps, it's possible to make successful graphics with just the basics. The main thing to know is that basic design elements and design principles can guide how things are organized within a visual space. The goal is to draw attention to the parts of the graphic that matter. It's not just about creating pretty aesthetics, but rather pointing the viewer's attention toward the specific information or trends that the graphic is trying to show. Important things should stand out, and less important things should be less noticeable. In other words, the visual elements should be clear and should provide the bulk of the explanation on their own. Words and labels should be supplementary to clarify things as needed.

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The example shown here are not very exciting, but it demonstrates how a clean design lets the information shine through. The cities are arranged in descending order, rather than alphabetically. And the simple bars make it easy to see -- without having to do any math -- that the biggest city has more than twice as many residents as the next biggest city. The typography starts with a large headline and then gets smaller to help the reader move through the parts of the graphic in the right order.

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The chart on the right shows how elements like color can be used to call attention to specific parts of the graphic. In this case, the idea is to highlight for residents of Philadelphia where their city sits in relation to others on the list.

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Smart thinking related to graphics really boils down to a single question…

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… Why are you doing the graphic? There are a lot of possible answers. So knowing exactly what you hope to accomplish will steer you toward the right form the graphic ought to take. So it's important to always ask this question up front. Another way to ask is What exactly are you hoping the viewer will understand by looking at this graphic?

Smart thinking means finding an appropriate graphic form for the information being displayed. Basic forms for graphics include maps, timelines, charts, tables, diagrams, and relational diagrams.

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For example, sometimes you might be doing a graphic because people need to see where things are.

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In that case, the situation calls for a map. Remember, the point of a map is to show where things are in physical geographic space. If the physical or relative locations of things are not central to the story being told, a map is probably not the best way to present the information. On that note, the technique of shading the states on a map of the U.S. is a common approach, but often it's not the best way to display the information since the geographic distribution of the data might not reveal all that much. Google maps and Maps4News are two basic resources for making basic maps. CartoDB is another tool that enables much more sophisticated data mapping.

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Other times, the key point is to show when various things happened.

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In that case, the appropriate graphic would be a timeline. A timeline organizes information chronologically. There are online tools that can be used to create timelines, including Dipity and Timeline.js.

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Perhaps the most common reason for doing a graphic would be to show how different things compare to each other.

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Making comparisons generally calls for either a chart or a table. Bar charts are often used to compare categories of numerical values, while a fever line shows how a single number has changed over consistent time intervals. Tables organize information into rows and columns. The data can include text, numbers or visual elements that communicate comparative information. Online graphics

tools like Infogram and Piktochart offer the ability to plot data into these and other types of data graphics, with some ability to do basic data mapping as well.

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Explaining how something works is a great area for graphics because it can be difficult to do in words alone.

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This kind of visual explanation typically calls for a diagram of some sort. Diagrams are some of the best graphics because they can show things that can't be explained any other way. But they also can be the most complicated to produce because some illustration may be required. However, a diagram could also be as simple as annotating a photograph to add detailed explanatory information.

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Showing how things relate to each other often calls for a special category of diagrams.

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These could be referred to as "relational diagrams." That would include things like Venn Diagrams, which show the overlap between groups or categories. It also includes things like organizational charts, flowcharts, playoff brackets and other means of visualizing how individuals or groups are connected to each other.

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There are now many different tools for creating infographics. Microsoft Word is actually one of the better options available for making tables. When it comes to charts and maps, a key factor in deciding what to use is where the graphic will be published. Most of the online tools are great if the graphic will go on a website but not as good if the outcome is going into print. Most of the online options allow at least limited use for free, and a few of them offer education discounts.

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When it comes time to edit a graphic, it helps to think about our initial formula for success:
- Is there useful information? Should it really be visualized? And will people want to see it?
- Is there good design? Are visuals used effectively? And does the design help viewers see the most important things?
- And is there smart thinking? Is it all organized so the finished graphic actually shows what it set out to show?

If all that is working…

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… then congratulations, you'll be looking at an awesome graphic.