

Information Design

Information design presents information in the form of infographics and data visualizations. Occasionally these two terms are used interchangeably, but there are substantive differences: infographics convey a single point or story, emphasizing stylization, for example by incorporating illustration. Data visualizations, on the other hand, typically engage larger data sets and strive for objectivity. These definitions are flexible and the two models can overlap, but understanding these distinctions can help you decide which mode to choose. For instance, if you are trying to illustrate a social phenomena with just a few numbers, the tactics of infographics may serve you best. If you have a large scientific data set, use data visualization models.

Information design is comprised of multiple design principles in action, as **shape, color, line, direction, and labels** all work together to communicate data. Given this complexity, the information designer must emphasize user-centric simplicity, clarity, accessibility, and pragmatism over expression. At each step in the design process, ask yourself: Does this decision help the user understand the information? Does it make it meaningful and useful? Does it *miscommunicate* any of the data?

Information design is unique in part because the designer works to **interpret, distill, and package** the data itself. Whether the data is self-gathered or collected from another source, designing it will involve filtering, structuring, and formatting. The difficulty of information design increases alongside the complexity of the information. Mass quantities of data points will inevitably become overwhelming for both the reader and the designer. It's often useful to generalize complex data—without compromising accuracy—to emphasize narratives and patterns. Make every effort to fact check as well.

Once the data is prepared, you are ready to **represent** it. Whether presenting quantitative or qualitative, spatial or temporal data, **a consistent visual framework** creates the conditions for meaningful understanding and comparison. Choose a form—an X-Y graph or a timeline for example—carefully. The type of data will likely determine the appropriate form. For instance, if data shows a series of events over time it might make for an excellent timeline, particularly if it aids the narrative. But if your data is about an increase in quantity over time you might want to forgo the timeline and plot the data on an X-Y graph. When it comes to designing geographic data, you may abstract the geography, but take special care to scale elements consistently.

Even though information design is all about data, it still **tells a story**. In *Visualizing Data*, Ben Fry describes the story arc with a beginning, middle, and end: “All data problems begin with a question and end with a narrative construct that provides a clear answer.” Creating a narrative through line in information design serves multiple purposes—it shapes the data, gets the audience's attention, and helps the audience *retain* the information.

Resources

Kim Baer, *Information Design Workbook: Graphic Approaches, Solutions, and Inspiration + 30 Case Studies* (Beverly, MA: Rockport, 2008).

Ben Fry, *Visualizing Data: Exploring and Explaining Data with the Processing Environment* (Sebastopol, CA: O'Reilly Media, Inc., 2008).

Joel Katz, *Designing Information: Human Factors and Common Sense in Information Design* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 2012).