

# Data Storytelling & Communication Cheat Sheet

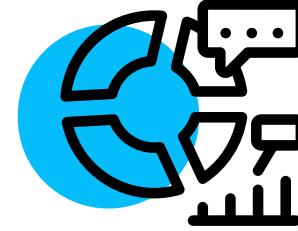
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## > What is data storytelling?

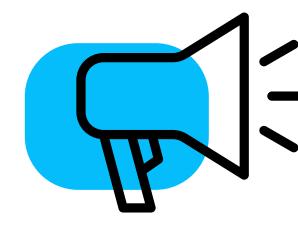
Data storytelling is often called the last mile of analytics. Sound communication skills, allows data professionals to drive action out of their insights. According to Brent Dykes, Author of [Effective Data Storytelling: How to Drive Change with Data, Narrative, and Visuals](#)—Data Storytelling is a combination of data, visuals, and narrative.



Data



Visuals



Narrative

The three elements of data storytelling  
(Source: [Effective Data Storytelling: How to Drive Change with Data, Narrative, and Visuals](#) by Brent Dykes)

## > Crafting effective visuals

### Choose the best visualization for your story

Each plot type is suited for communicating specific things about specific types of data. Start by choosing an appropriate plot type.

Line plot



Show changes in numeric values over time.

Bar plot



Visualizes numeric values by categories. It can be ranked or unranked

Scatter plot



Show the relationship between two numeric values.

Histogram

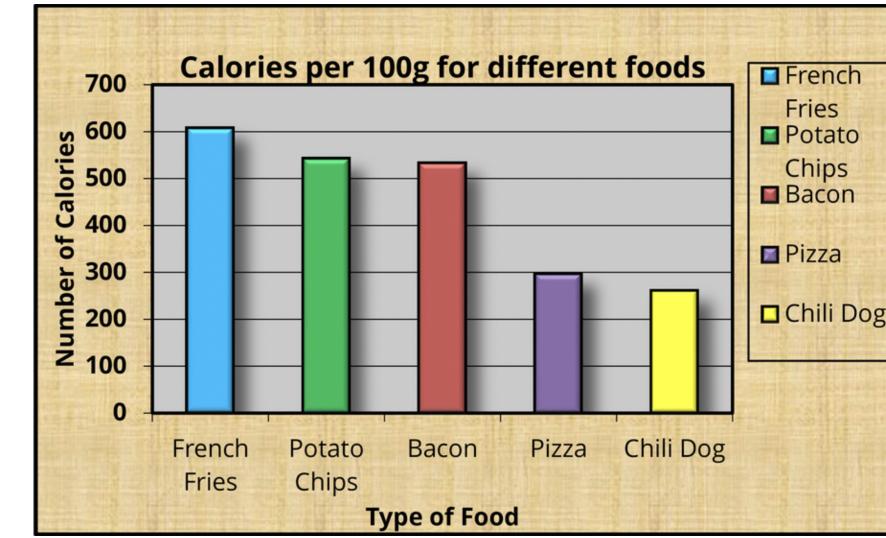


Show the distribution of numeric values.

To learn about all the types of visualizations you can use, check out our [Data Visualization Cheat Sheet](#).

### Keep visualizations minimal and avoid clutter

Ruthlessly edit your plots to remove or minimize elements that distract from the message of the plot. In particular, make non-data elements (parts of the plot that don't directly represent a data value, like the grid lines) less distracting. A great example comes from [Darkhorse Analytics](#), which showcases exactly the value of decluttering visualizations.



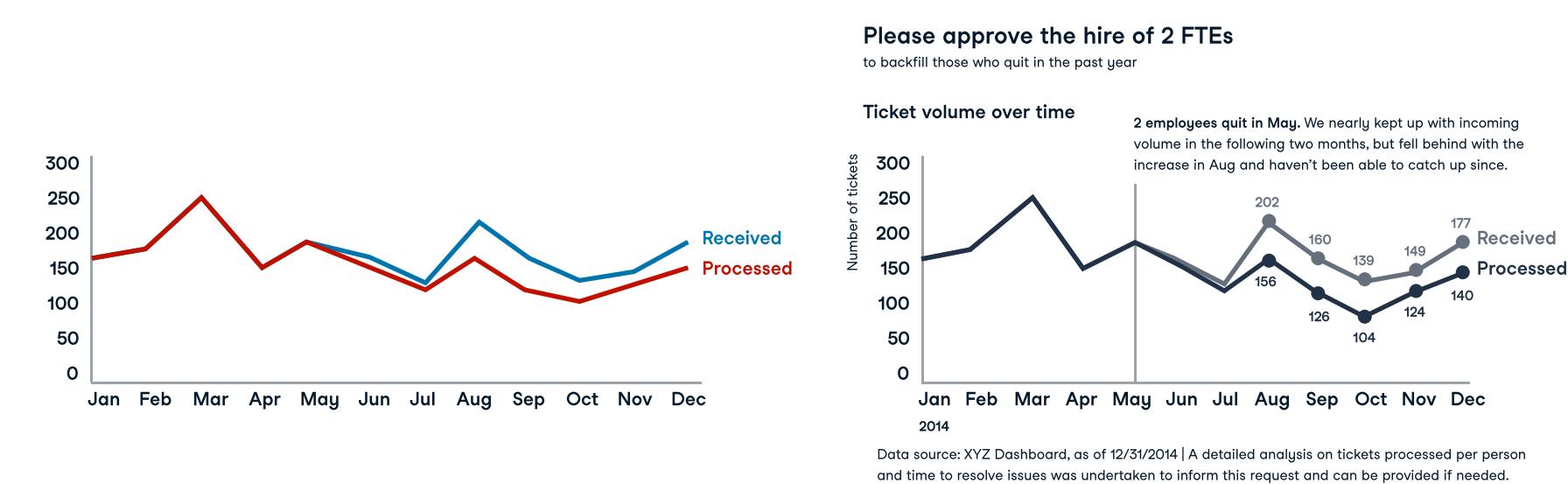
Decluttering a visualization in action  
(Source: [Darkhorse Analytics](#))

### Data visualization decluttering best practices

- Use just enough white space to keep the visualization from looking busy
- Remove chart borders when applicable
- Remove or minimize gridlines or axes when applicable
- Clean up axis labels when applicable
- Label data directly (as opposed to using a legend)
- Remove data markers when applicable
- Use special effects (**bold**, underline, *italics*, shadows) sparingly

## Use text appropriately

While too much text can add clutter, text can also be an extremely effective tool at highlighting insights within your visualizations. Cole Nussbaumer Knaflic, Author of [Storytelling with Data](#), provides an excellent example with the following visualization.



How text can be a useful visual tool when crafting effective visuals  
(Source: [Storytelling with Data](#) by Cole Nussbaumer Knaflic)

### Using text in data visualizations

- When applicable, label axes and titles for clarity
- Label important data points when necessary
- Provide useful context around insights within the title or subtitle
- Adjust font size when highlighting specific messages within your labels
- When applicable, try to answer common audience questions with labels

## Use colors effectively

### The fundamentals of color theory in data visualization

Color is one of the most powerful tools available for emphasizing different aspects of your data visualization. Here are different properties to keep in mind when choosing an appropriate color palette for your visualization.

- **Hue** represents the range of possible colors, from red, through orange, green and blue, to purple and back to red.
- **Chroma** is the intensity of the color, from grey to a bright color.
- **Luminance** is the brightness of the color, from black to white.

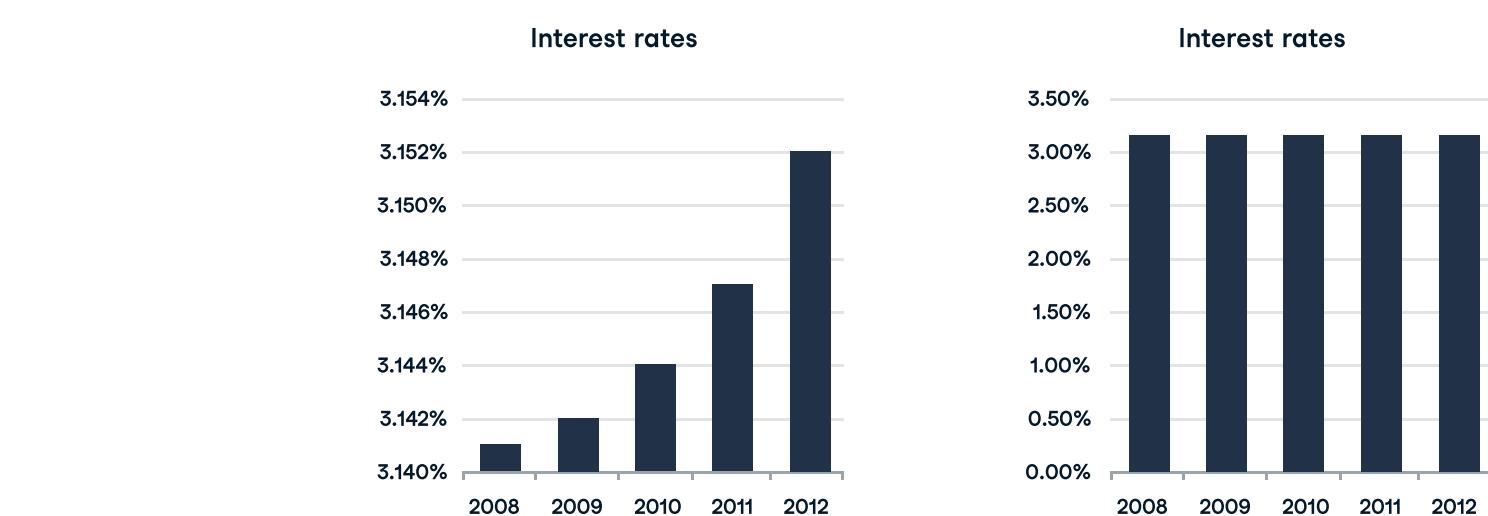
There are three common types of color palettes, that depend on these dimensions.

Type	Purpose	What to vary	Example
Qualitative	Distinguish unordered categories	Hue	A bar chart of 2022 smartphone sales for different smartphone manufacturers
Sequential	Showcase intensity of a single variable	Chroma or luminance	A map showcasing Covid-19 vaccination prevalence
Diverging	Compare between two groups	Chroma or luminance with two hues	Voter registration prevalence by political party in the USA

## Do not mislead with data stories

The fastest way to lose credibility when presenting data stories is to inadvertently (or intentionally) mislead with your data insights. Here are top best practices to avoid misleading with data stories.

### Same Data, Different Y-Axis



Starting the y-axis at the smallest value or at zero dramatically changes the story told by the plot

### Best practices to avoid misleading with data stories

- If you are visualizing times series data, make sure your time horizons are large enough to truly represent the data
- If the relative size of each value is important, then ensure that your axes start with zero
- Ensure that axes scales are appropriate given the data you're treating
- If you are sampling data for descriptive purposes, make sure the sample is representative of the broader population
- Use centrality measures such as mean or median to provide context around your data

## > Crafting effective narratives with data

### Know the audience

To communicate effectively, you need to know who your audience is, and what their priorities are. There is a range of possible audiences you may encounter when presenting, and crafting an audience specific message will be important. Examples of audiences you may present to are:



Executive

Basic data literacy skills



Data Leader

Data expert



Business Partner

Advanced data literacy skills

#### Prioritizes outcomes & decisions

#### Cares much more about business impact than a 1% incremental gain in a machine learning model accuracy or a new technique you're using

#### Prioritizes rigour & insights

#### Cares much more about how your arrived at your insights and to battle test them for rigour

#### Prioritizes tactical next steps

Cares much more about how your analysis impacts their workflow, and what should be their main takeaway from the data story

### Considerations when crafting audience specific messaging

Aspect	What do you need to consider?
Prior knowledge	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ What context do they have about the problem?</li> <li>▪ What is their level of data literacy?</li> </ul>
Priorities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ What does the audience care about?</li> <li>▪ How does your message relate to their goals?</li> <li>▪ Who is driving decision-making within your audience?</li> </ul>
Constraints	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ What is the audience's preferred format?</li> <li>▪ How much time does an audience have to consume a data story?</li> </ul>

## Choose the best medium to share your story

There are different ways you can deliver a data story. The importance of each is different depending on the audience of your data story and the setting you're delivering your data story in.

Type	Important considerations
Presentation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Ensure the length of your presentation is appropriate</li> <li>▪ Leave any highly technical details to the appendix</li> <li>▪ Ensure there is a narrative arc to your presentation</li> </ul>
Long-form report	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Be extra diligent about providing useful context around data visualizations and insights</li> <li>▪ Leave any highly technical details to the appendix</li> </ul>
Notebook	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Ensure that you provide useful context on how you arrived at a certain conclusion</li> </ul>
Dashboard	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Make use of the dashboard grid layout</li> <li>▪ Organize data insights from left to right, top to bottom</li> <li>▪ Provide useful summary text of key visualizations in your dashboard</li> </ul>

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