

D E S I G N M A T T E R S

a rant by daniel roelfs

Prologue

Bad design is intrinsic to science

Should science be ugly? This is a serious question asked by serious people at seminars. Some assume that an aesthetically appealing presentation signals at best a lack of priorities, and at worst a lack of rigour.

Nature - *The design decisions behind Nature's new look* (2019)

Kristoffer Magnusson @krstoffr · Oct 25, 2019

Replies to @dsquintana

I must admit I tend to get suspicious when I see nice slides. Which is idiotic since I love design and think it's important, and often try to design nice slides myself

1 3 ...

Kristoffer Magnusson @krstoffr · Oct 26, 2019

Now that I think about it, part of my suspicion is probably caused by the fact that at gambling research conferences lobbyists and corporate people tend to have the most polished slides

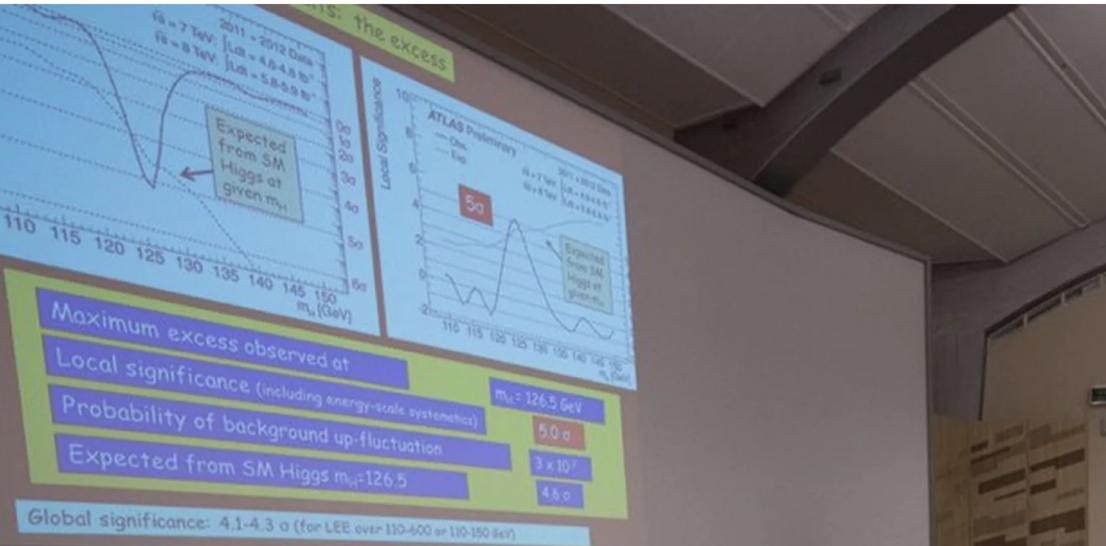
...
↑

CERN scientists inexplicably present Higgs boson findings in Comic Sans

By Sam Byford | @345triangle | Jul 4, 2012, 4:56am EDT

Image CERN

f   SHARE



242 

 **Brian Cox** 
@ProfBrianCox

It's entirely appropriate to present in Comic Sans
@VincentConnare !

10:01 AM · Jul 4, 2012 · Twitter for Mac

177 Retweets 2 Quote Tweets 53 Likes

Reply from prof. Brian Cox to comments from Comis Sans designer Vincent Connare

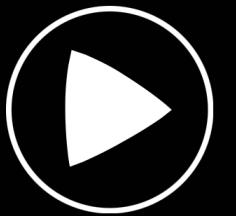
[News](#) > [News](#) > Topic: At CERN

CERN to switch to Comic Sans

From today, all of CERN's official communication channels are switching to exclusive use of the font Comic Sans

1 APRIL, 2014 | By [Cian O'Luanaigh](#)

Fabiola Gianotti



Related Articles



Computing | News |
1 April, 2019



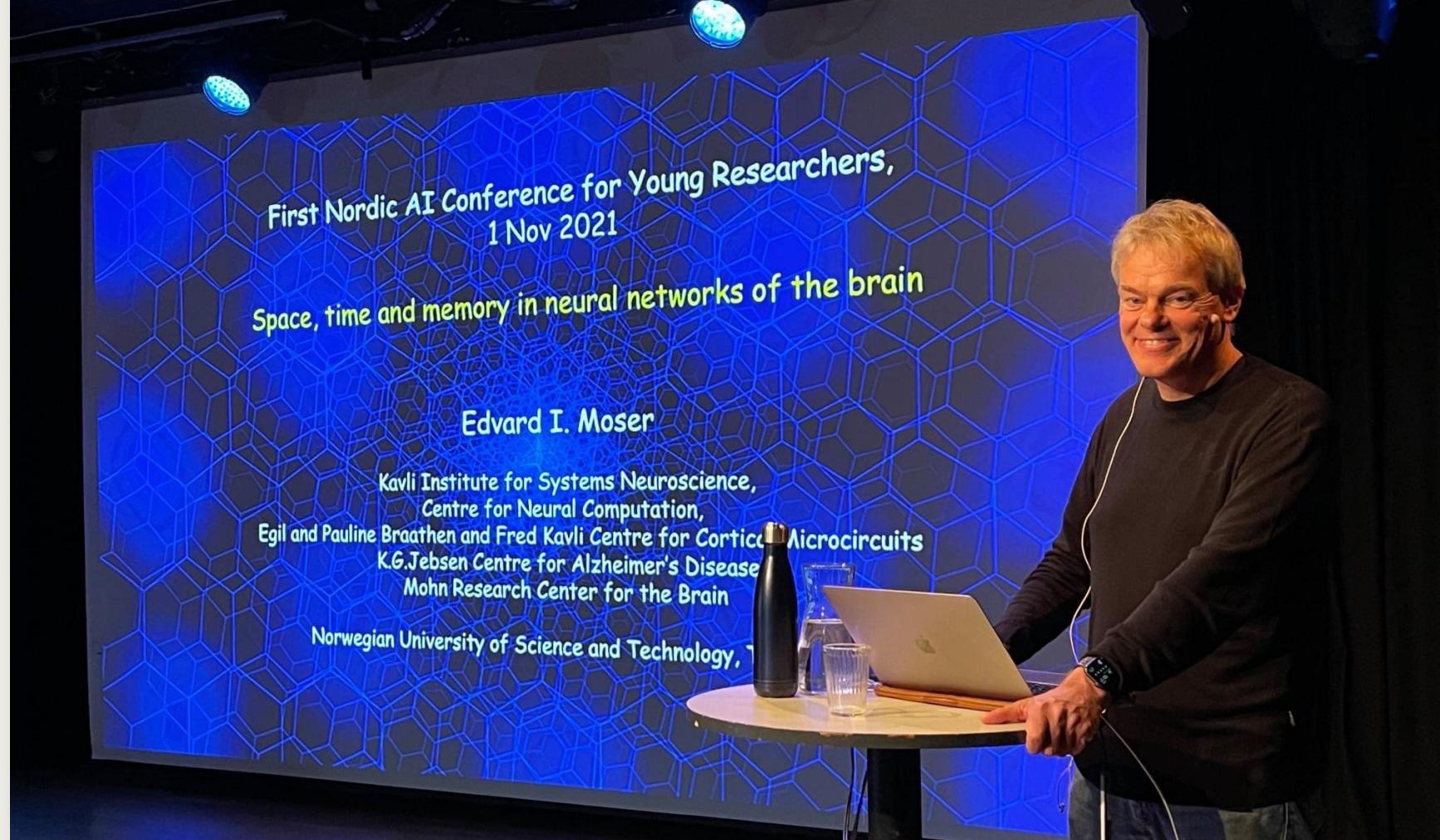
At CERN | News | 1 April, 2018



**literally any basic
black and white default
powerpoint template**

Introduction

- Words are usually remembered better when presented visually rather than aurally (Smith 1985; Jones, Ragalooshian, and Bosner, 1992)
- Visual imagery is helpful in encoding words into memory (Rork and Wendel, 1972; Rosenkranz and Guildenstern, 1997)



literally any poster session ever



<basic design principles>

Chapter 1

Scientific posters

I don't want to talk about scientific posters

presented work in poster format. However, their value is undermined by their limited ability to effectively disseminate information and facilitate networking. Addi-

Rowe & Ilic – Rethinking poster presentations at large-scale scientific meetings – is it time for the format to evolve? (2015)

Nguyen Gobber - How to Design Scientific Posters?
(presentation from graphic designers on improving scientific posters, with general rules)

Dirma Janse - The Science Poster Design Guide
(book + website created by graphic designer)

Mike Morrison - How to create a better research poster in less time
(YouTube video on UX of poster sessions (~20mins) + templates, also this paper)

Chapter 2

"I don't care about design"

- No one ever

"But whether something is nice or pretty is subjective!"

**Art can be subjective, design is either good or bad at serving a purpose
and the ability to serve its purpose can be measured**

"So I should care about design, but why invest time in making it look pretty too"

People like looking at pretty things

Case in point: the entire field or marketing, advertising, interior design, ...

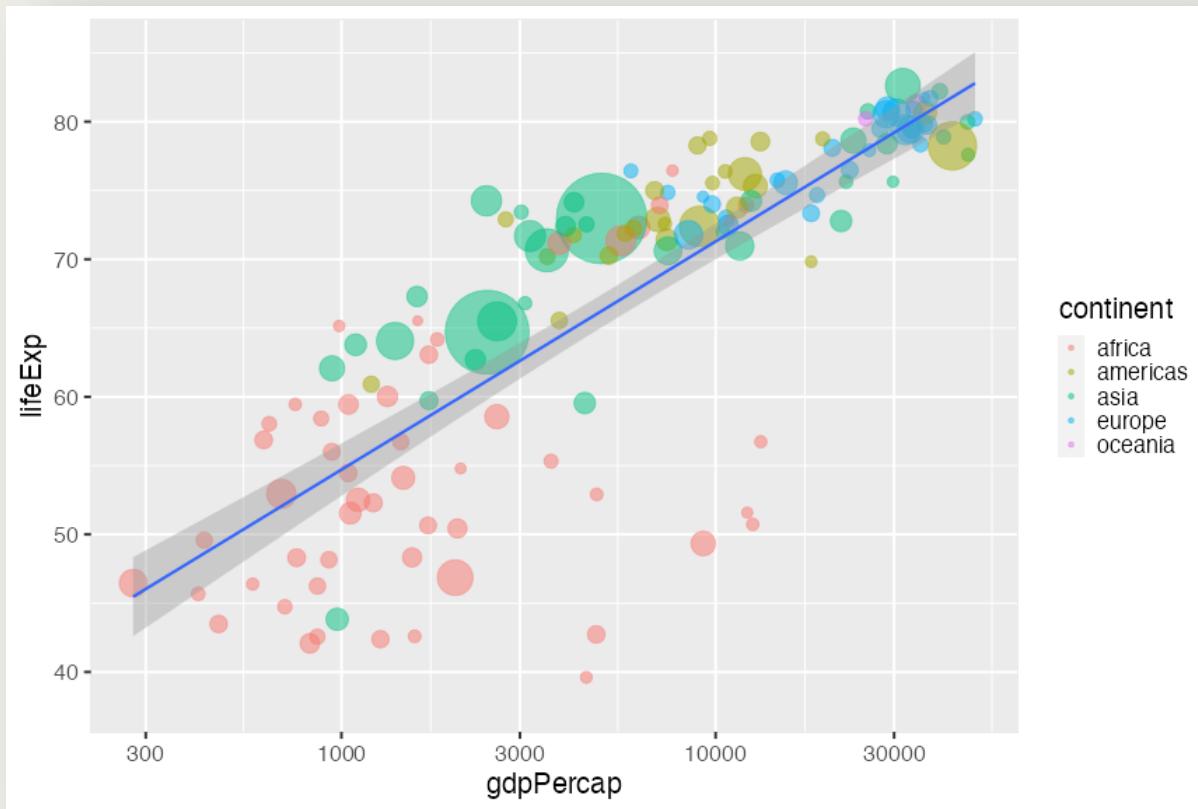




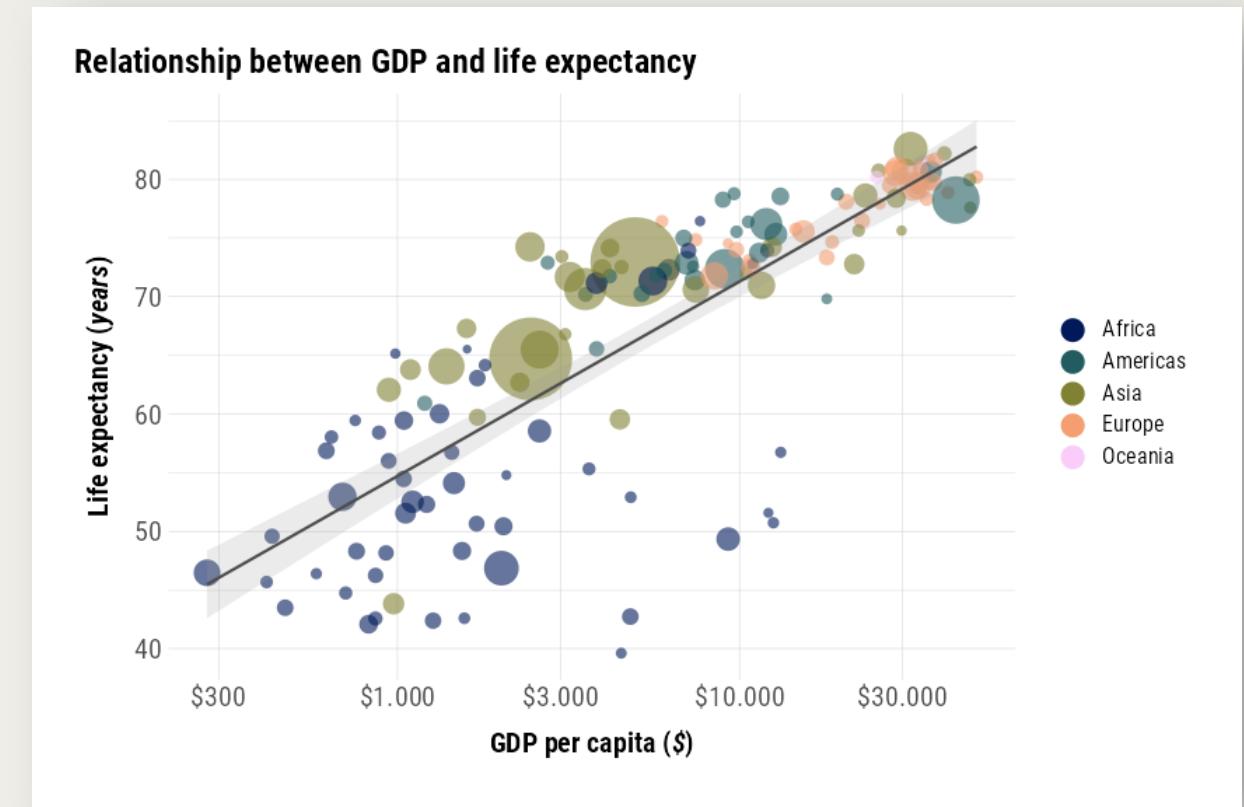
AMC website in 2005

A screenshot of the modernized Academic Medical Center (AMC) website in 2021. The top navigation bar includes links for 'Locatie AMC | Meibergdreef' and 'Locatie VUmc | De Boelelaan', along with 'Zorg', 'Educatie', and 'Research'. The 'Amsterdam UMC Universitair Medische Centra' logo is prominently displayed. Below the navigation, there is a banner featuring a red background with white COVID-19 virus particles. A link 'Informatie coronavirus | Lees meer' is visible. The main content area contains eight white rectangular boxes with icons and text: 'Coronavirus' (red virus icon), 'Afspraak' (calendar icon with '11'), 'Route, parkeren, locatie' (location pin icon), 'Hulp bij bezoek' (person icon), 'Mijn Dossier' (person icon), 'Expertisecentra' (orange and blue icon), 'Verwijzen' (person with plus icon), and 'Stel uw vraag' (person icon with speech bubble). A dark teal footer bar at the bottom has a 'Stel me een vraag' button and a green square icon with a white arrow.

AMC website in 2021



Gapminder figure in default ggplot style

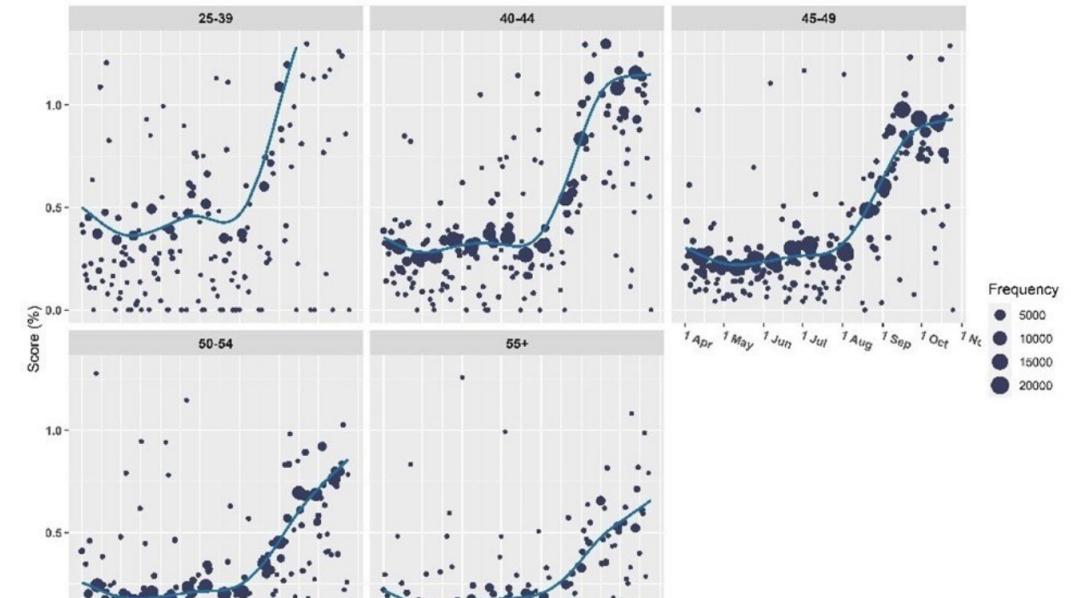


Gapminder figure with better style and accessible colors

Hva har vi funnet ut og hva ser vi på?

Symptomer

I NorFlu og MoBa har vi spurte deltakerne hver 14. dag om de har hatt nye symptomer på luftveisplager. Ut fra svarene har vi laget et «symptomscore» som gir et bilde av forekomsten av koronasykdom. I figurene under ser vi at det var relativt lite symptomer i sommer i alle aldersgrupper, men så en jevn økning utover høsten. Symptomscoret er høyest blant de yngste.



Tweets by @jburnmurdoch



John Burn-Murdoch
@jburnmurdoch



Went for a 10k run: first 7 solo, final 3 with the dog.

Turns out the dog is an excellent pace-setter!

Just need to work on our transition time...

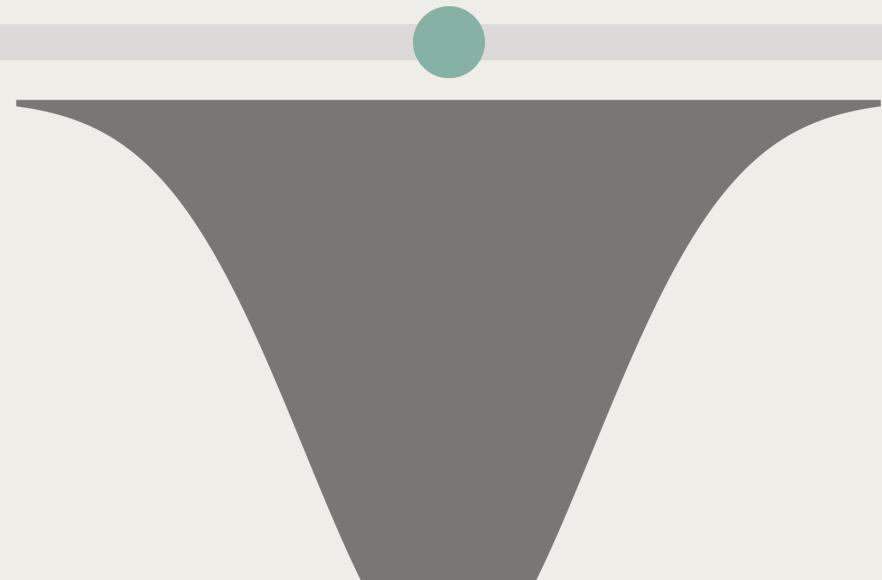
Embed

[View on Twitter](#)

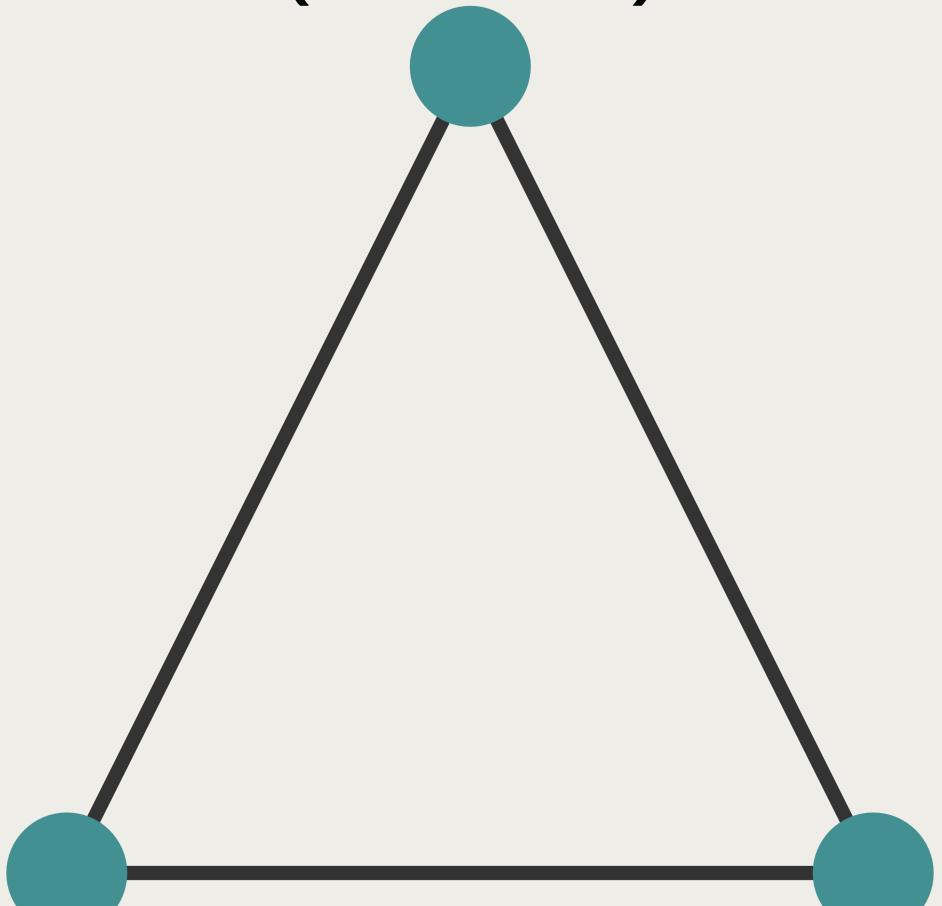
Low cost, low reward

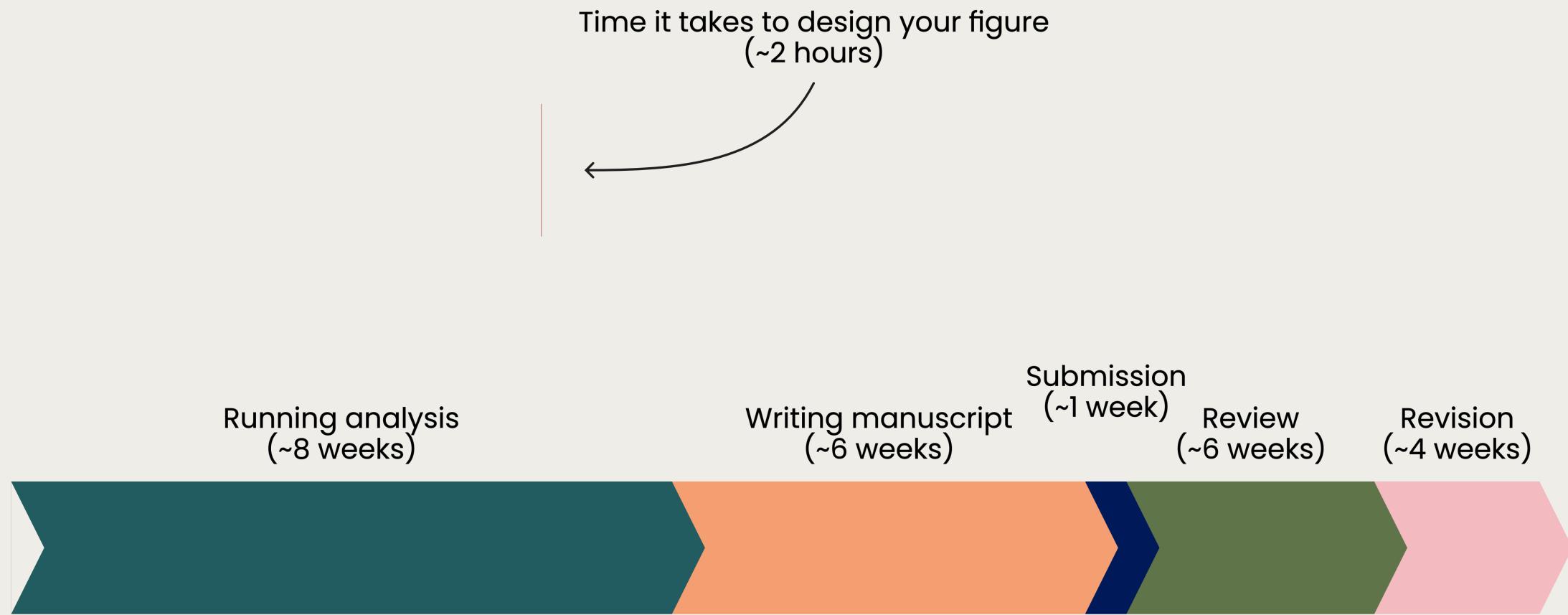


High cost, high reward



Affordable
(in resources)





Chapter 3

Design is communication

OPEN ACCESS | [Science Applications Forum](#)



Fundamentals of graphic design—essential tools for effective visual science communication

Authors: [Karen J. Murchie](#) and [Dylan Diomede](#) | [AUTHORS INFO & AFFILIATIONS](#)

Publication: FACETS • 11 June 2020 • <https://doi.org/10.1139/facets-2018-0049>

Paper on the influence of graphic design on science communication (source)

Educators
Journalists
Policymakers
etc.

Editors
Reviewers
Grant agencies

How many of these will read and understand your paper?

Academics are people too, people like looking at nice things

Good and clear figures or illustrations are part of science communication

People remember visuals better than text

Succeeding at explaining 1 thing > failing to explain 10 things

Low cognitive effort = happy audience

Chapter 4

Presentations

More people will see your presentations than your posters

More people you care about will see your presentations

Presentations have higher return on investment

So let's talk about how to improve presentations

Be nice to your scientist

cognitive load

Definition

- Cognitive load is the amount of mental resources used in **working memory** to perform various tasks

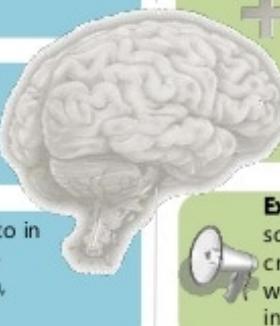
Working Memory

 Only 5-9 items can be stored in working memory at one time and only 2-4 items can actually be processed simultaneously (Wolfolk, 2014 p. 322)

 Attention filters all sensory input and determines what input will be selected for further processing.

 Rehearsal and integration with existing knowledge aid in transferring new material to long term memory.

 If information is not attended to in the working memory within 15 seconds it is discarded. (Guyan, 2013)



Cognitive Load

 **Intrinsic cognitive load** refers to the amount of cognitive resources that a person would need to transfer new information to the long term memory.

 **Germane cognitive load** comes from the deep processing of new information by organizing, integrating and connecting it with existing knowledge. (Clark, 2014)

 **Extraneous cognitive load** can create all sorts of havoc on working memory. It creates distractions and disrupts the working memory from processing new information.

"Intrinsic Load + Germane Load + Extraneous Load < Working Memory"(Guyan, 2013)



COGNITIVE LOAD

WORKING MEMORY

Max. 2-4 items at a time¹

Attention filters input

Consolidation with existing knowledge

Discarded if not redirected after 15sec²

COGNITIVE LOAD

Intrinsic cognitive load

Germane cognitive load³

Extraneous cognitive load

1. Wolfolk (2014), p. 322

2. Guyan (2013)

3. Clark (2014)

Too many colors

Rotated text

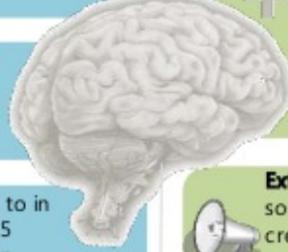
Poor font choice

Too much text

cognitive load

Definition

- Cognitive load is the amount of mental resources used in **working memory** to perform various tasks

Working Memory	Cognitive Load
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"Intrinsic Load + Germane Load + Extraneous Load < Working Memory" (Guyan, 2013)

Why people use icons

- Here is some statement or a question (Smith et al, 2014)
- Here's a second longer statement that requires two lines instead of one (Jones & Jones, 2019)
- This is the third and last statement, but it's still unbalanced



Here is some statement or a question¹

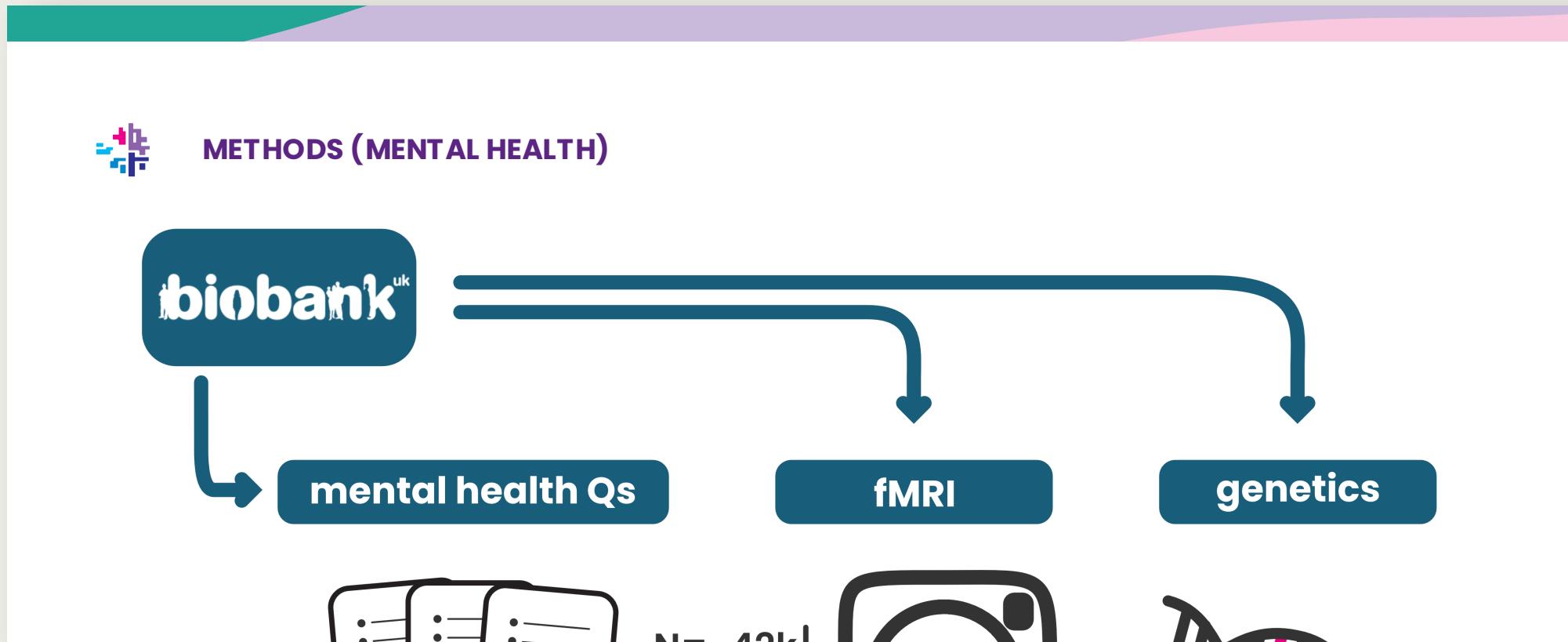
Here's a second longer statement that requires two lines instead of one²

This is the third and last statement, but it's still unbalanced

1. Smith et al, 2014

2. Jones & Jones, 2019

Replace text with illustrations wherever you can



Time spent is an investment

Provides visual aid to explain complex concepts and methods

Can be reused for manuscripts and grant applications

Optimizing figures - Synergy of ESRs, v3

WP4: Genetic variant discovery and functional analysis

WP5: Disease trajectories, environmental stressors and interplay

WP6: Digital and eHealth tools for outcome and drug-response

WP7: Stratification and prediction towards 'precision psychiatry'

Secure tools

Genes for improved environmental prediction

Genes for stratification

Phenotypes for functional analysis

ESR1, ESR2, ESR3, ESR4, ESR5, ESR6, ESR7, ESR8, ESR9, ESR10, ESR11, ESR12, ESR13, ESR14, ESR15

NORMENT
Norwegian Centre for Mental Disorders Research

Participants 33 Chat Share Screen Record Reactions Leave

Spend a disproportionate amount of time on your figures

Eligibility screening → Visit 1 → One month washout → Visit 2 → One month washout → Visit 3

Visit procedure

Pre-test assessments

- State anxiety
- Nasal cavity condition
- Heart rate variability
- Blood collection

Single-dose nasal spray

Participants randomised to receive low dose oxytocin (8IU), mid-dose oxytocin (24IU), or placebo

EEG, learning task & physiological measures

- Visual evoked potentials
- Resting-state EEG
- Reversal learning
- Heart rate variability

40 minute wait

Time after intranasal treatment

40 min 60 min 65 min 80 min

Visual evoked potentials

Rest

Reversal learning task

Baseline Visual stimulation Post 1 Post 2

I use Biorender.com and Powerpoint to make my figures

Figure 5. Participants will complete social and non-social trials of the probabilistic reversal task, in which they are presented a set of faces (social trial) or abstract figures (non-social trial). Using trial-and-error feedback, participants need to uncover which of the two stimuli are correct (denoted by the black arrow, not shown to participants). Feedback is presented (green or red face) after each decision.

Unmute Start Video Participants 31 Chat Share Screen Record Reactions Leave



PowerPoint

free at university, frustrating



InkScape

free, open source, not great



Adobe Illustrator
Adobe InDesign

\$\$\$, free at university virtual desktop



Affinity Designer

Maximize the space available

Widescreen presentation

Widescreen
canvas/tv

4x3 screen
canvas





NORMENT
Norwegian Centre for
Mental Disorders Research

NORMENT House Meeting

Presentation by: Alina Marie Sartorius



"1 minute per slide" is outdated

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Extraneous cognitive load

Source: (2011) - 200

Source: (2011) - 200

Be more lazy

Keep it simple, stupid

Less is more

Chapter 5

The devil is in the details

Yes, I dislike Arial more than Comic Sans. Though it's the undisputed king of the GOOFY FONTS, Comic Sans is at least honest about what it is. But Arial is merely a bland, zero-calorie Helvetica substitute.

Gothic Fright Refusal

ARIAL

Gothic Fright Refusal

HELVETICA

For many, the two are indistinguishable. But for typographers, Arial contains none of the consistency and balance that makes Helvetica successful.

Arial and Comic Sans are universally disliked among designers ([source](#), [source](#))

One morning, when Gregor Samsa woke from troubled dreams, he found himself transformed in his bed into a horrible vermin. He lay on his armour-like back, and if he lifted his head a little he could see his brown belly, slightly domed and divided by arches into stiff sections. The bedding was hardly able to cover it and seemed ready to slide off any moment. His many legs, pitifully thin compared with the size of the rest of him, waved about helplessly as he looked. "What's happened to me?" he thought. It wasn't a dream. His room, a proper human room although a little too small, lay peacefully between its four familiar walls.

Arial 🤢

One morning, when Gregor Samsa woke from troubled dreams, he found himself transformed in his bed into a horrible vermin. He lay on his armour-like back, and if he lifted his head a little he could see his brown belly, slightly domed and divided by arches into stiff sections. The bedding was hardly able to cover it and seemed ready to slide off any moment. His many legs, pitifully thin compared with the size of the rest of him, waved about helplessly as he looked. "What's happened to me?" he thought. It wasn't a dream. His room, a proper human room although a little too small, lay peacefully between its four familiar walls.

Poppins 👍

SCHJØDT

SCHJØDT

SCHJØDT



STALLEN BARNEHAGE

STALLEN BARNEHAGE

Californian FB ★	Gill Sans MT ★	Seravek ★
Calisto MT ★	Goudy Old Style ★	Sitka ★
Century Schoolbook ★	Helvetica ★	
	Helvetica Neue ★	

The B list: OK in limited doses

Agency FB	Constantia	Modern No. 20
Big Caslon	Corbel	Perpetua ★
Bodoni MT	Futura ★	Rockwell
ITC Bodoni 72	Geneva	Segoe UI ★
Calibri ★	Gloucester MT Extra	Tw Cen MT ★
Candara	Cond.	
Centaur	High Tower Text ★	

The C list: Questionable

Andale Mono	Courier	Maiandra GD
Baskerville ★	Courier New	Menlo
Berlin Sans FB	Didot	Niagara Solid & En-
Bernard MT Condensed	Elephant	graved
Cambria ★	Engravers MT	Onyx
	Eras ITC	Plantagenet Chero-

Open Sans

Roboto

Poppins (body font for this presentation)

Lato (header font for this presentation)

Alegreya

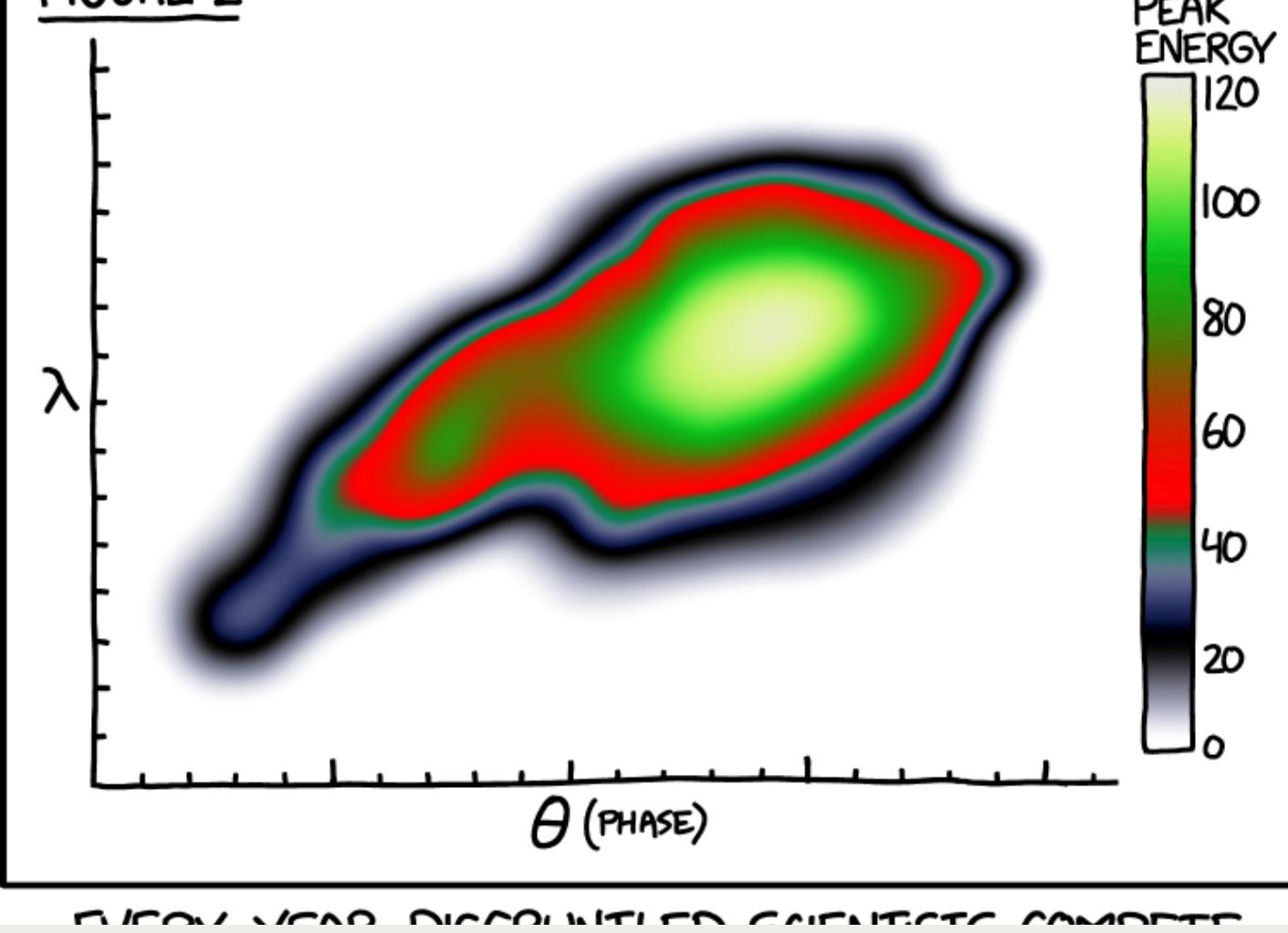
Montserrat

Raleway

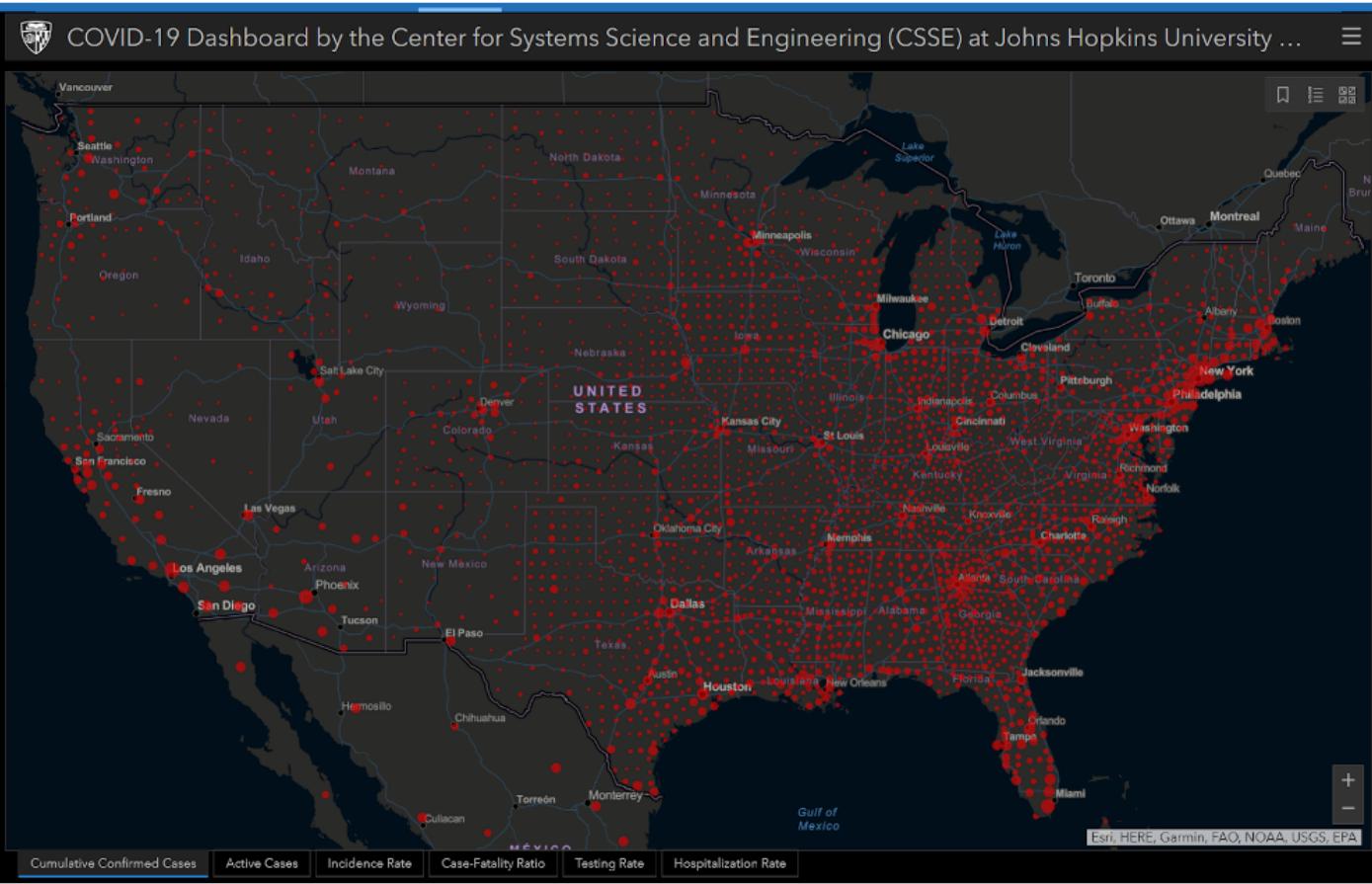
Merriweather

Chapter 6

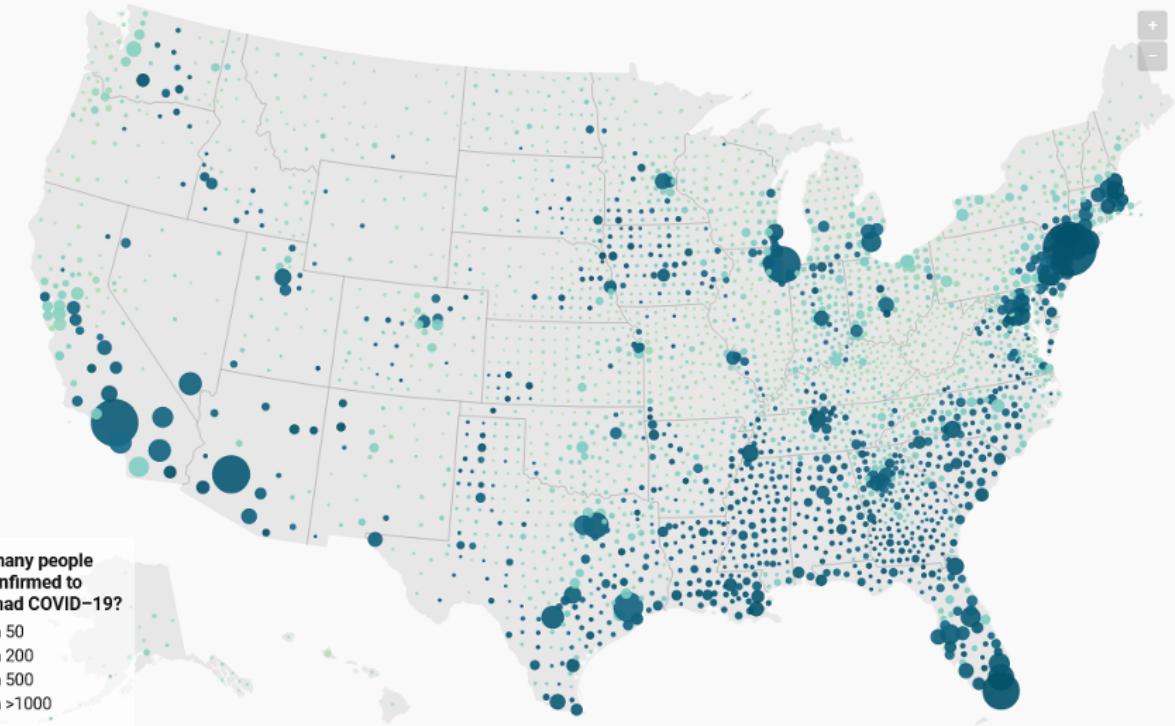
Colors are complicated



EACH YEAR DISCOUNTED SCIENTIFIC COMPUTER



Number of confirmed COVID-19 cases in US counties



Colors influence your emotional reaction (image source: source)

Perspective | [Open Access](#) | Published: 28 October 2020

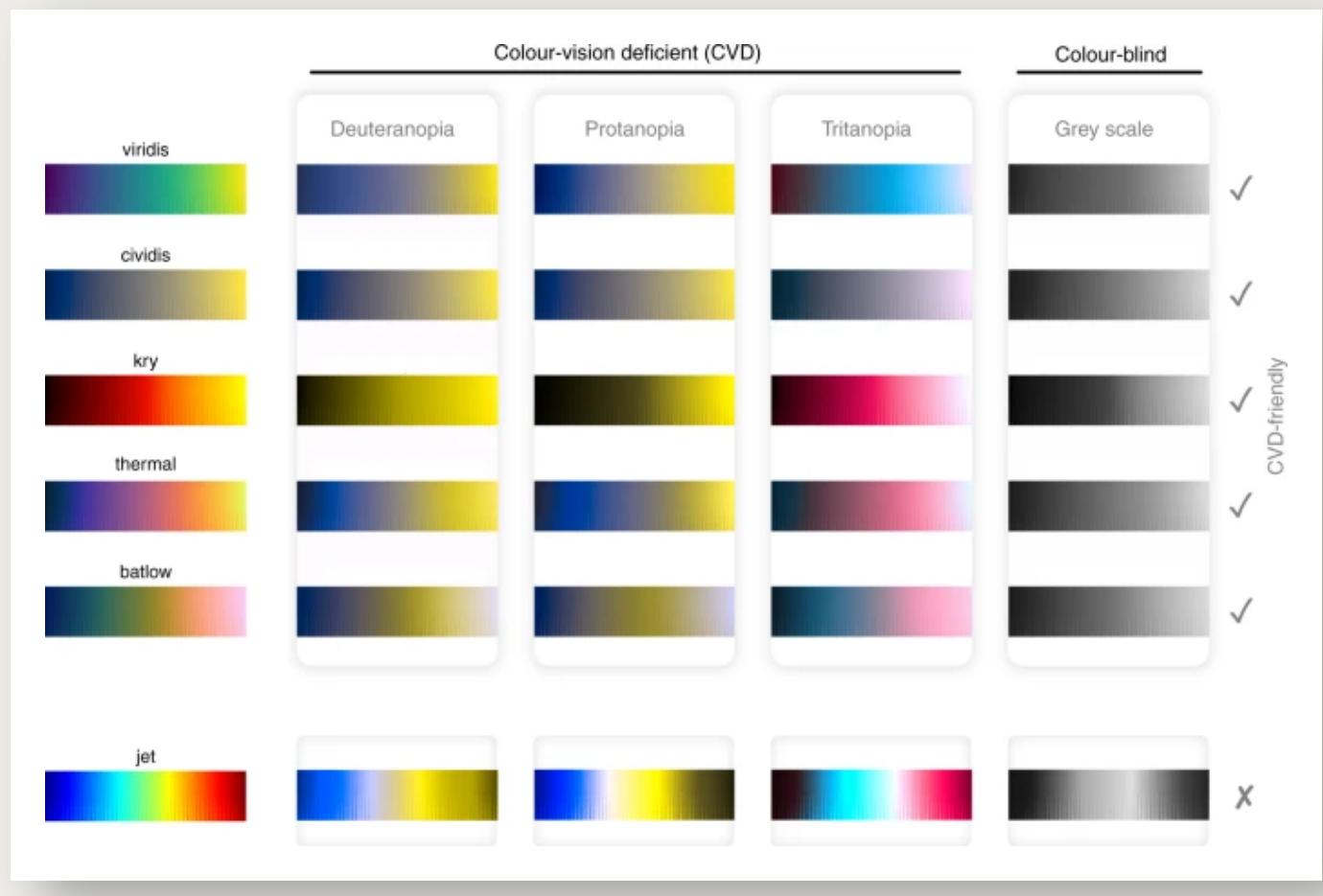
The misuse of colour in science communication

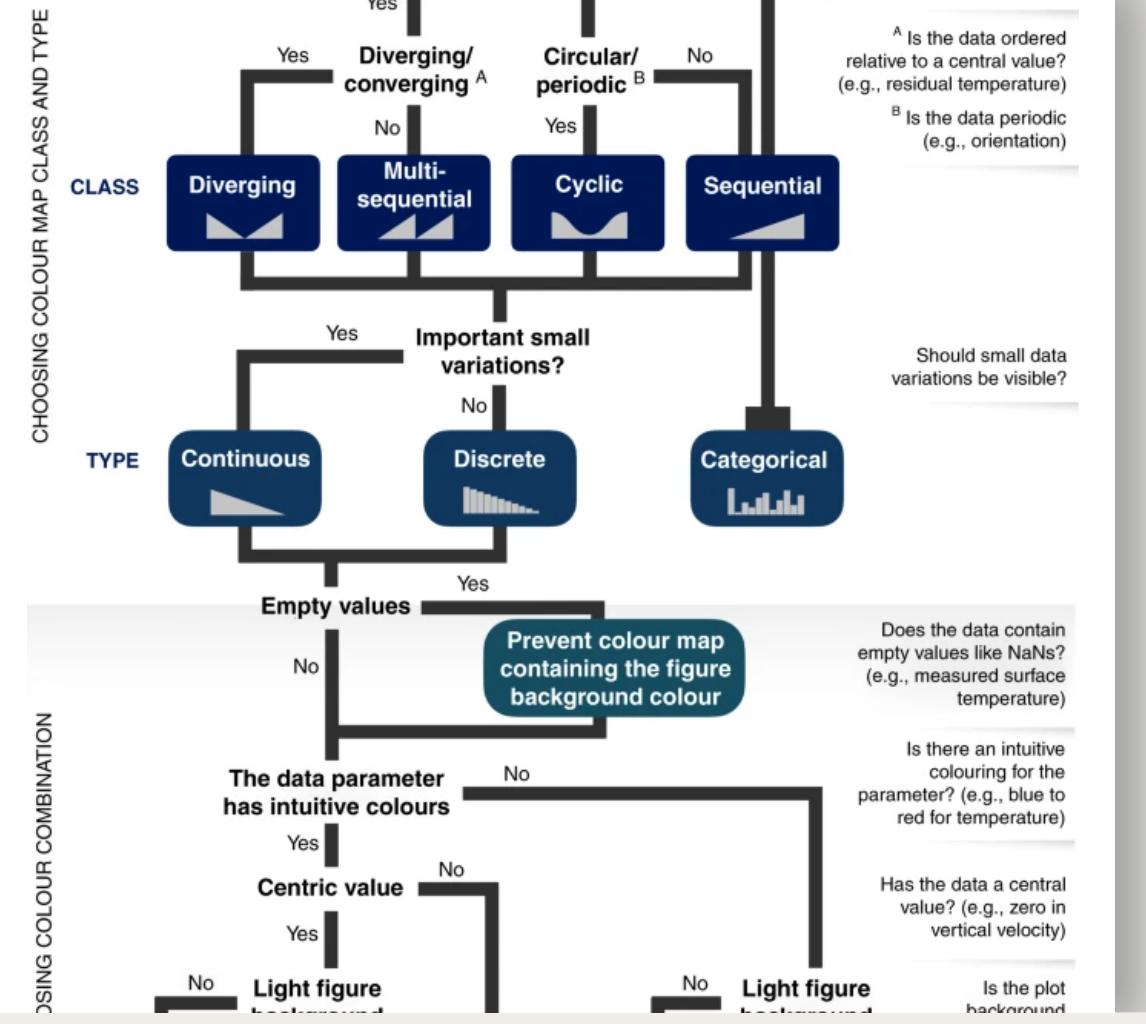
[Fabio Crameri](#) , [Grace E. Shephard](#) & [Philip J. Heron](#)

[Nature Communications](#) **11**, Article number: 5444 (2020) | [Cite this article](#)

145k Accesses | **37** Citations | **1166** Altmetric | [Metrics](#)

Fabio Crameri *et al.* - The misuse of colour in science communication, *Nature Communications* (2020)





Chapter 7

Simple ways to quickly improve a figure

(with code )

how to use scientific colors in {ggplot2}

```
1 library(normentR)
2
3 penguins %>%
4   ggplot(aes(x = bill_length_mm, y = body_mass_g,
5             color = species)) +
6   geom_point(size = 2) +
7   scale_color_norment(discrete = TRUE,
8                       palette = "batlow") +
9   theme_norment(base_size = 9)
```

```
1 library(scico)
2
3 penguins %>%
4   ggplot(aes(x = bill_length_mm, y = body_mass_g,
5             color = species)) +
6   geom_point(size = 2) +
7   scale_color_scico_d(palette = "batlow") +
8   theme_minimal(base_size = 9)
```

theme_minimal() is your friend

```
1 penguins %>%
2   ggplot(aes(x = bill_length_mm, y = body_mass_g,
3               color = species)) +
4   geom_point(size = 2) +
5   scale_color_norment(discrete = TRUE,
6                       palette = "batlow") +
7   theme_minimal()
```

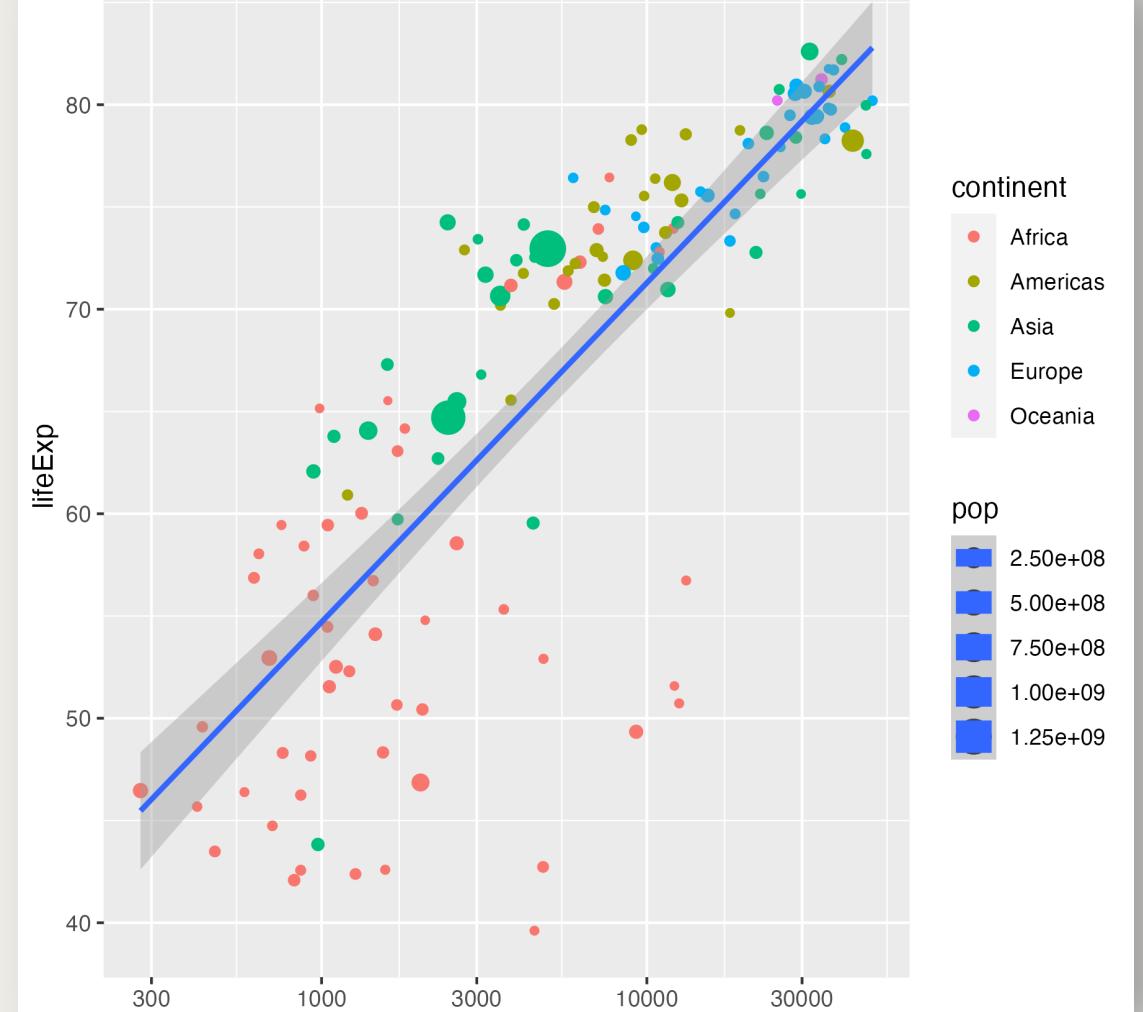
My setup

```
1 ### CREATE SCATTER PLOT #####
2
3 #-- Libraries -----
4
5 library(tidyverse)
6 library(ggtext)
7 library(scico)
8 library(patchwork)
9
10 #-- Load data -----
11
12 ...
```

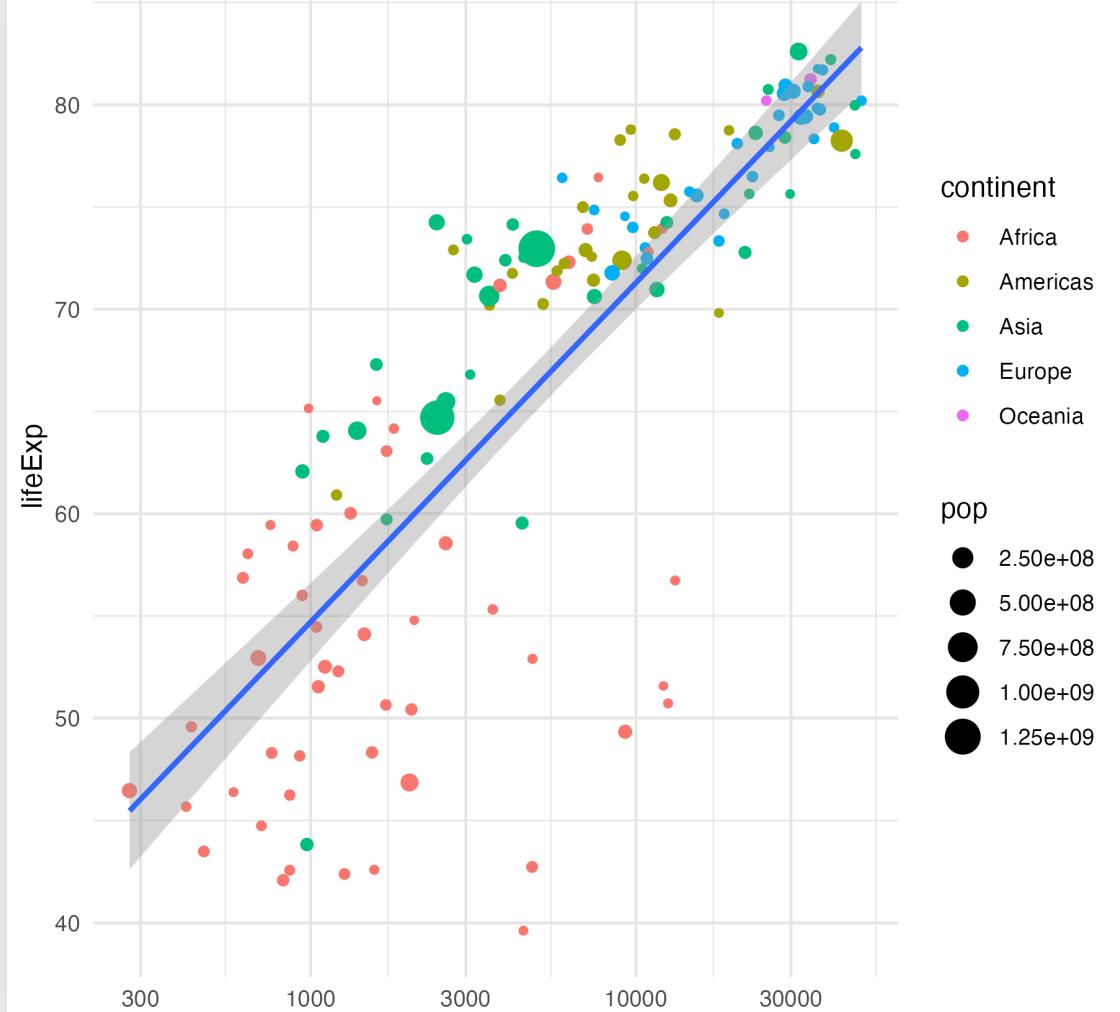
My setup

```
1 ##### RUN XGBOOST ANALYSIS #####
2
3 # -- Libraries -----
4
5 import numpy as np
6 import pandas as pd
7 import matplotlib.pyplot as plt
8
9 # -- Load data -----
10
11 ...
```

```
1 data %>%
2   ggplot(aes(x = gdpPercap, y = lifeExp,
3               size = pop)) +
4   geom_point(aes(color = continent)) +
5   geom_smooth(method = "lm") +
6   scale_x_log10()
```



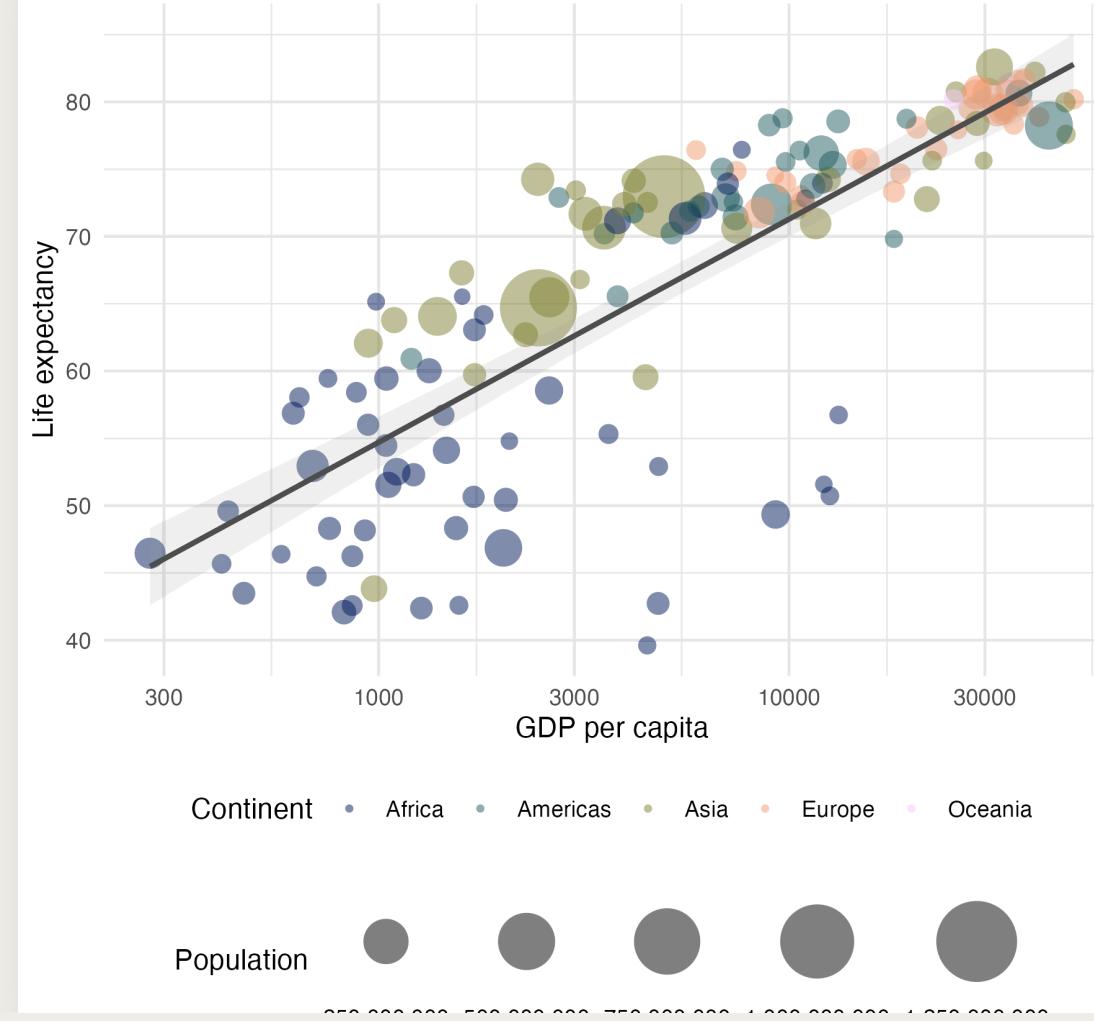
```
1 data %>%
2   ggplot(aes(x = gdpPercap, y = lifeExp,
3               size = pop)) +
4   geom_point(aes(color = continent)) +
5   geom_smooth(method = "lm", show.legend = FALSE) +
6   scale_x_log10() +
7   theme_minimal() +
8   theme(panel.grid = element_line(colour = "grey90"))
```



```

1 data %>%
2   ggplot(aes(x = gdpPerCap, y = lifeExp,
3               size = pop)) +
4   geom_point(aes(color = continent), alpha = 0.5, str
5   geom_smooth(method = "lm", color = "grey30",
6               alpha = 0.15, show.legend = FALSE) +
7   labs(title = "Relation between GDP and life expectancy",
8        x = "GDP per capita",
9        y = "Life expectancy",
10       color = "Continent",
11       size = "Population") +
12   scale_x_log10() +
13   scale_color_scico_d(palette = "batlow") +
14   scale_size_continuous(range = c(1,15), labels = scale
15                         guide = guide_legend(label.po
16   theme_minimal() +
17   theme(plot.title = element_markdown(size = 14),
18         legend.box = "vertical",
19         legend.position = "bottom",
20         panel.grid = element_line(colour = "grey90"))
21 )

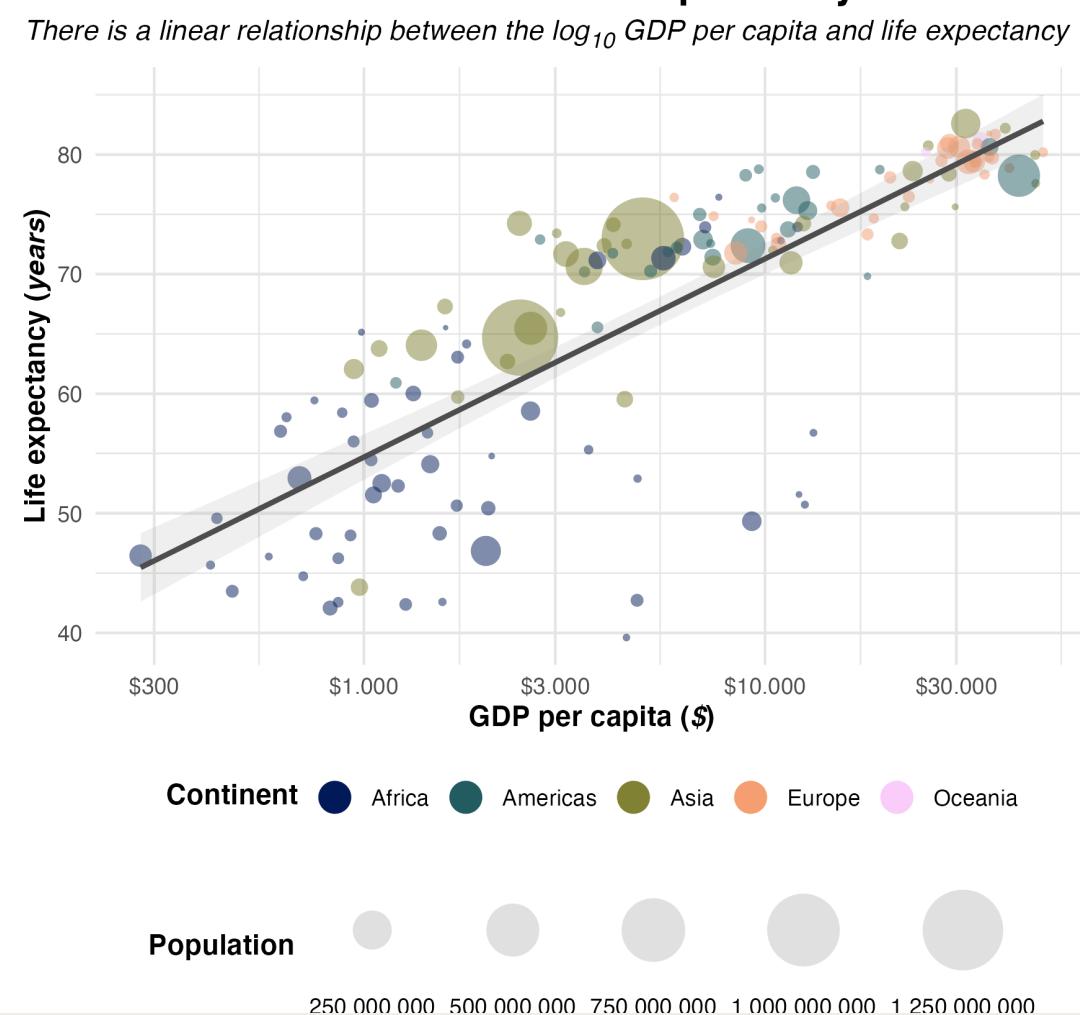
```

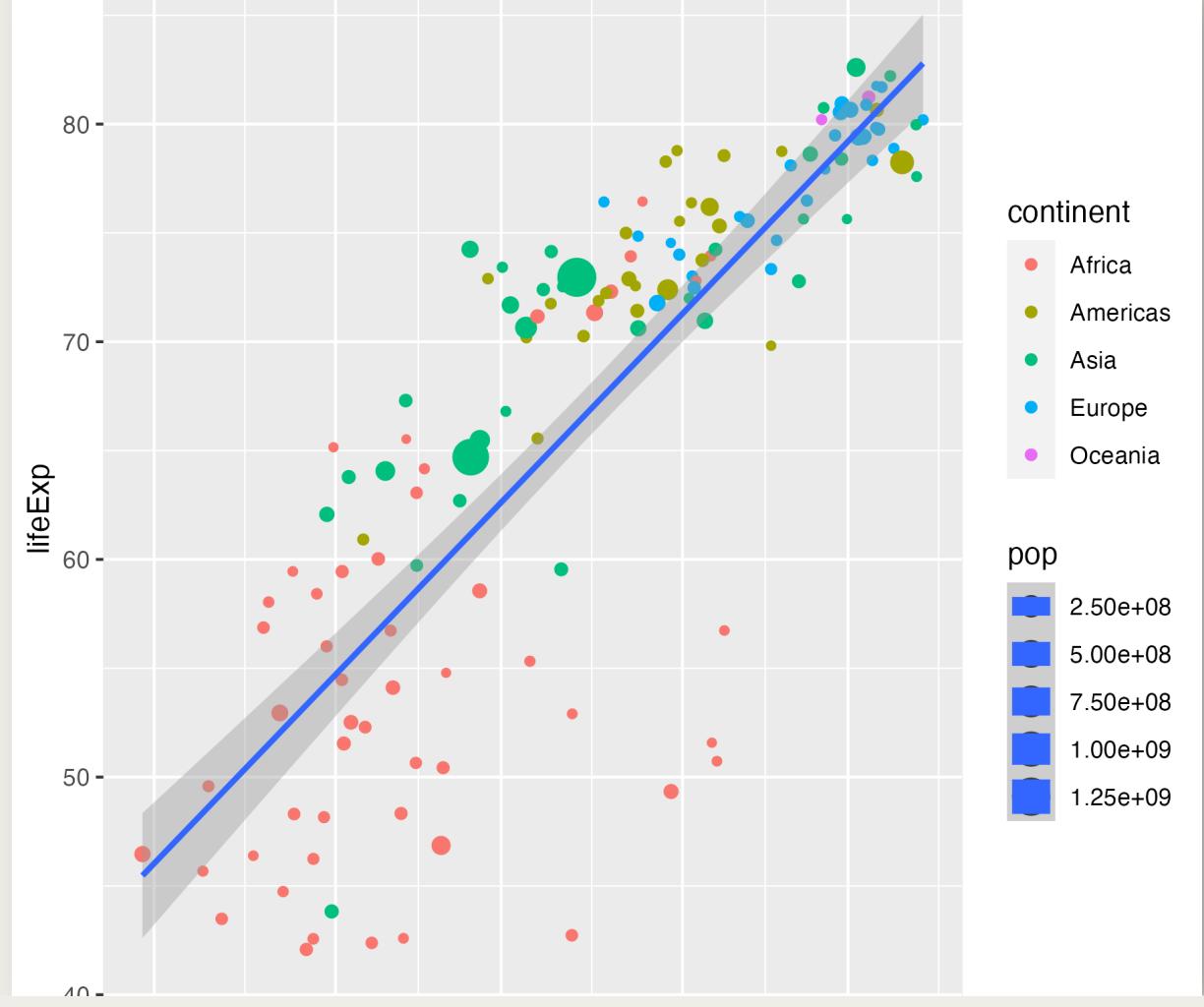


```

5   geom_smooth(method = "lm", color = "grey50",
6     alpha = 0.15, show.legend = FALSE) +
7   labs(title = "Relation between GDP and life expectancy",
8     subtitle = "There is a linear relationship between GDP per capita and life expectancy",
9     x = "GDP per capita (_$_)",
10    y = "Life expectancy (_years_)",
11    color = "Continent",
12    size = "Population") +
13   scale_x_log10(labels = scales::label_dollar(accuracy = 1),
14   scale_color_scico_d(palette = "batlow",
15     guide = guide_legend(
16       override.aes = list(size = 6,
17         alpha = 1
18     )) +
19   scale_size_continuous(range = c(3,15), labels = scales::label_number(accuracy = 1),
20     guide = guide_legend(
21       label.position = "bottom",
22       override.aes = list(shape =
23         fill =
24     )) +
25   theme_minimal() +
26   theme(plot.title = element_markdown(size = 16, face = "bold"),
27     plot.subtitle = element_markdown(face = "italic"),
28     plot.title.position = "plot",
29     axis.title.x = element_markdown(face = "bold"),
30     axis.title.y = element_markdown(face = "bold"))

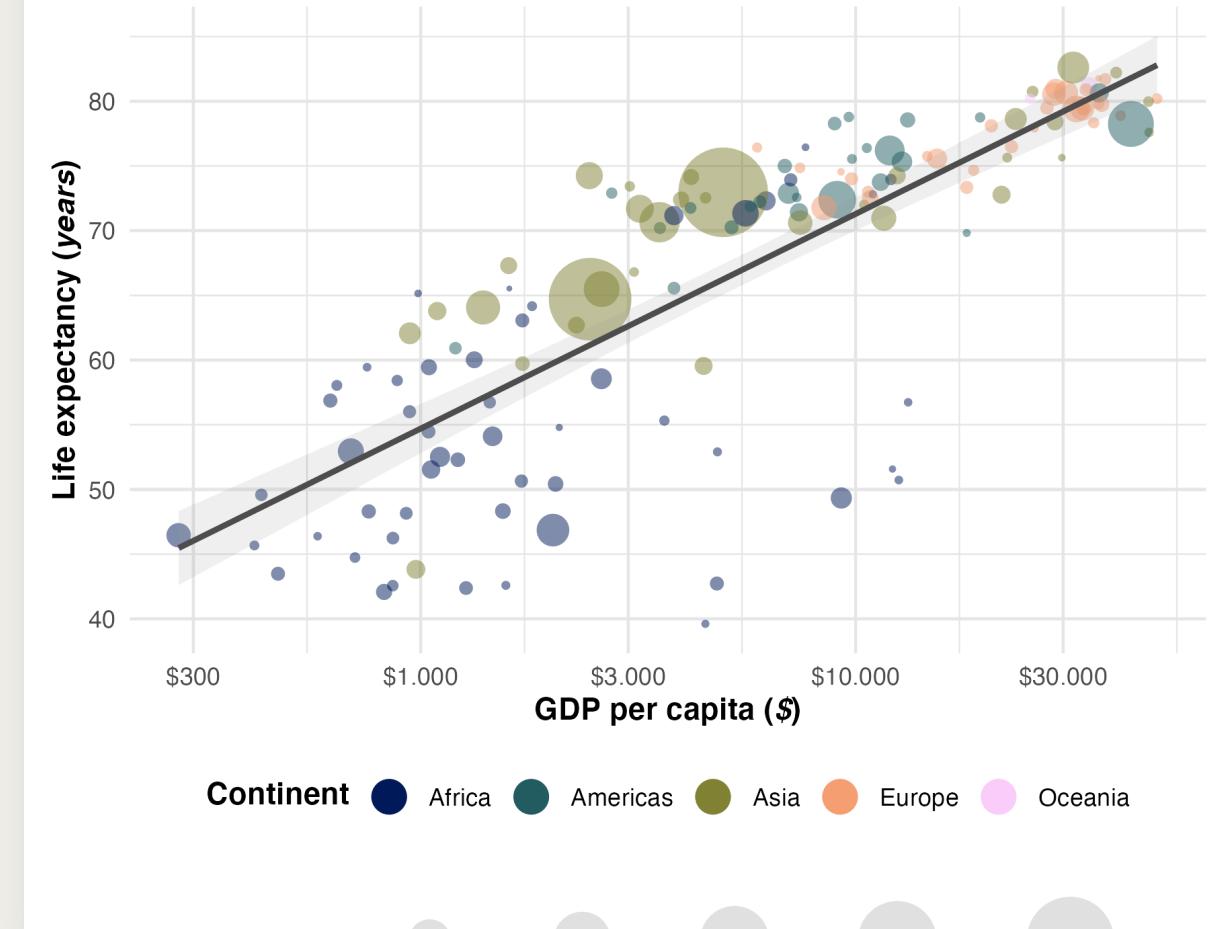
```

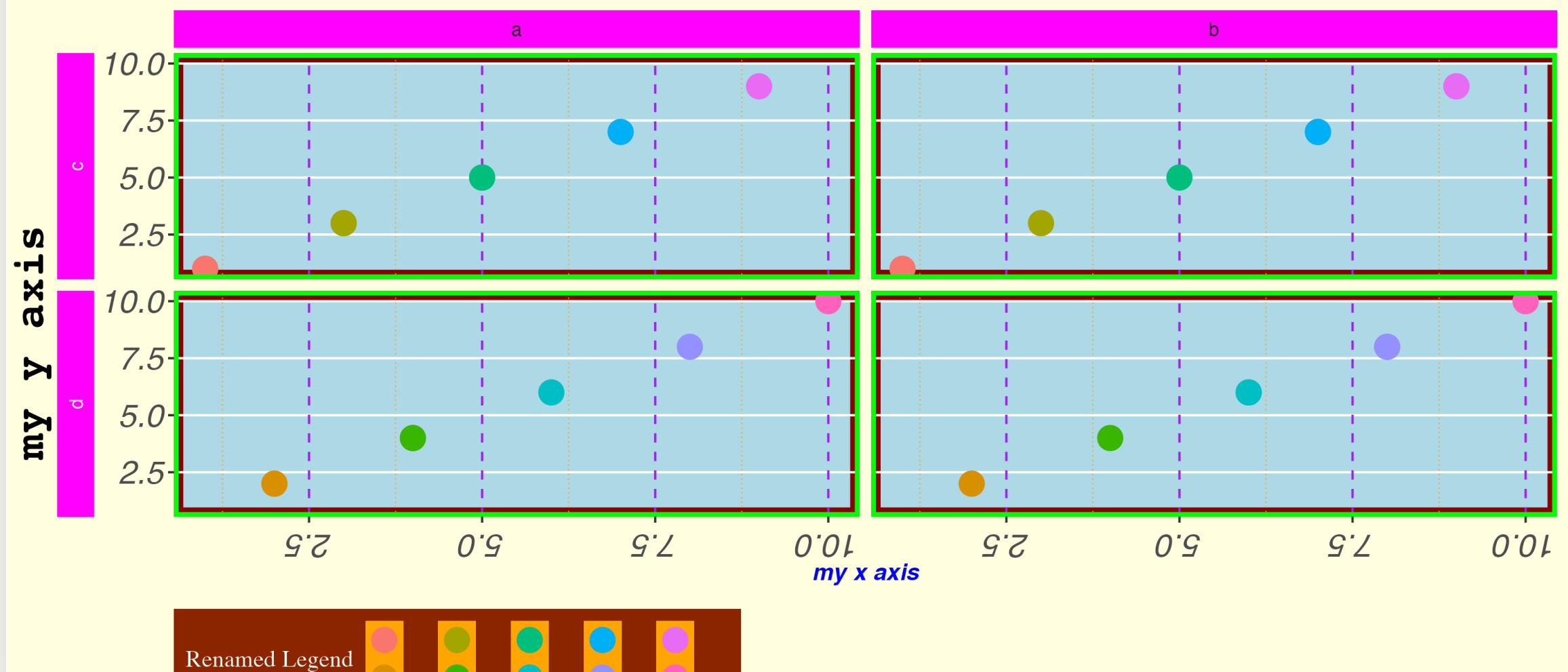




Relation between GDP and life expectancy

There is a linear relationship between the \log_{10} GDP per capita and life expectancy





```
2 geom_point(size = 5) +
3 labs(title = "test title",
4      subtitle = "test subtitle",
5      x = "my x axis",
6      y = "my y axis",
7      caption = "this is a caption",
8      col = "Renamed Legend") +
9 facet_grid(w ~ z, switch = "y") +
10 theme(
11   plot.background = element_rect(fill = "lightyellow"),
12   plot.title = element_text(size = 30, hjust = 0.25),
13   plot.subtitle = element_text(size = 20, hjust = 0.75, color = "mediumvioletred", family = "serif")
14   plot.caption = element_text(size = 10, face = "italic", angle = 25),
15
16   panel.background = element_rect(fill = "lightblue", colour = "darkred", size = 4),
17   panel.border = element_rect(fill = NA, color = "green", size = 2),
18   panel.grid.major.x = element_line(color = "purple", linetype = 2),
19   panel.grid.minor.x = element_line(color = "orange", linetype = 3),
20   panel.grid.minor.y = element_blank(),
21
22   axis.title.x = element_text(face = "bold.italic", color = "blue"),
23   axis.title.y = element_text(family = "mono", face = "bold", size = 20, hjust = 0.25),
24   axis.text = element_text(face = "italic", size = 15),
25   axis.text.x.bottom = element_text(angle = 180), # note that axis.text options from above are inherited
26
27 strip.background = element_rect(fill = "magenta")
```

Epilogue

Some basic rules for better design

Keep It Simple, Stupid

When in doubt, go for greyscale

e.g.

Black on white (*when presenting in a bright room*)

Light grey on black (*when presenting in a darkened room*)

Don't use Comic Sans or Arial, ever!

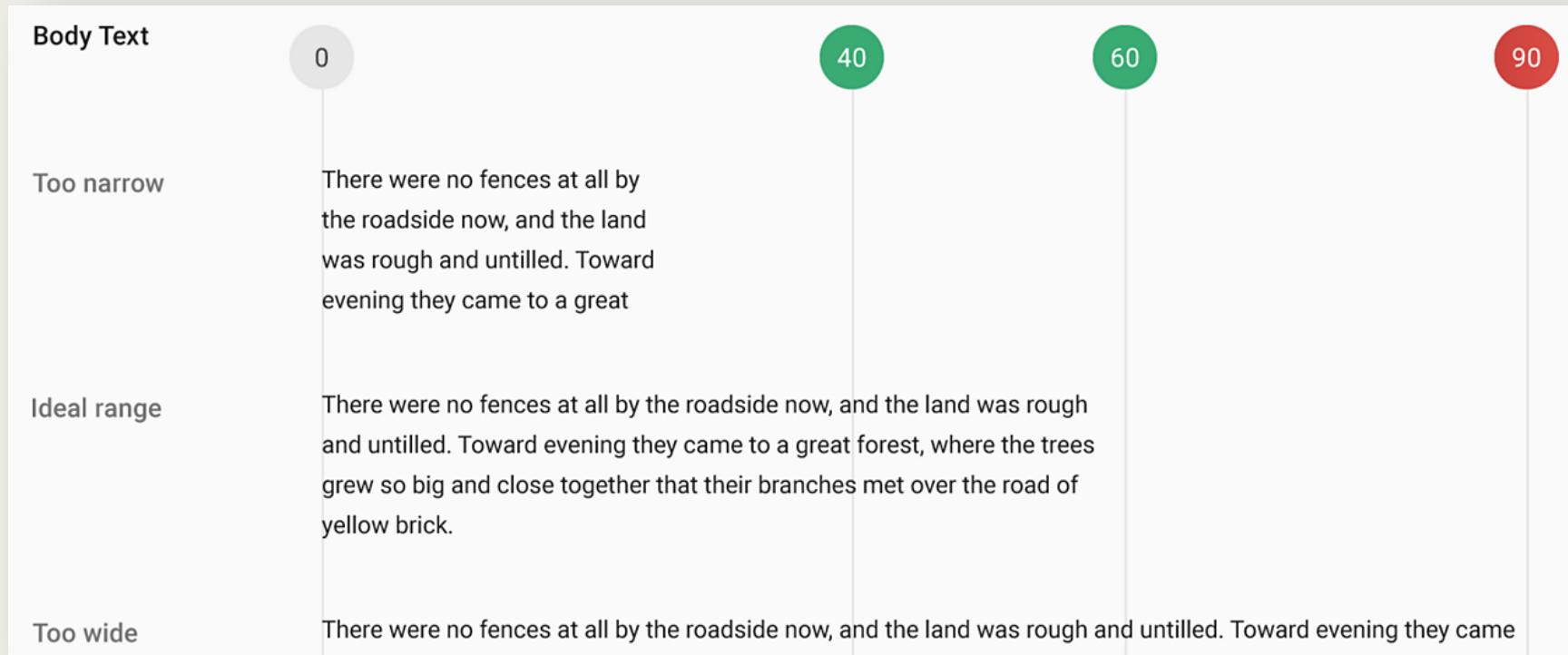
system fonts

*Avoid if you can,
choose wisely if
you can't*

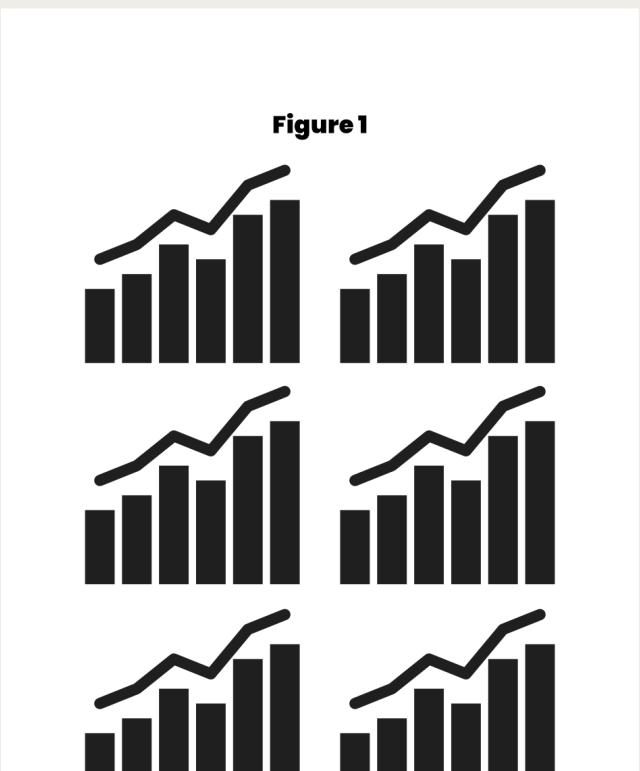
System fonts are the fonts already installed on your computer. Some are better than others. In printed documents they present three problems.

- ① *Many system fonts aren't good.* The Windows and Mac OS libraries have improved, but they're still minefields of awful fonts. I won't name names, but my least favorite rhymes with Barial.

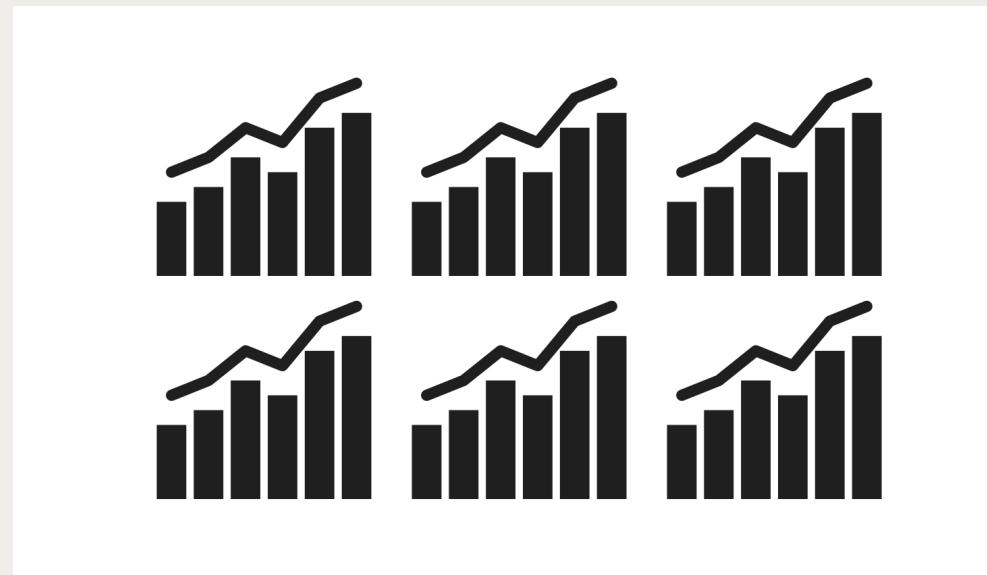
Length of a single line should be between 40-60 characters



Manuscript



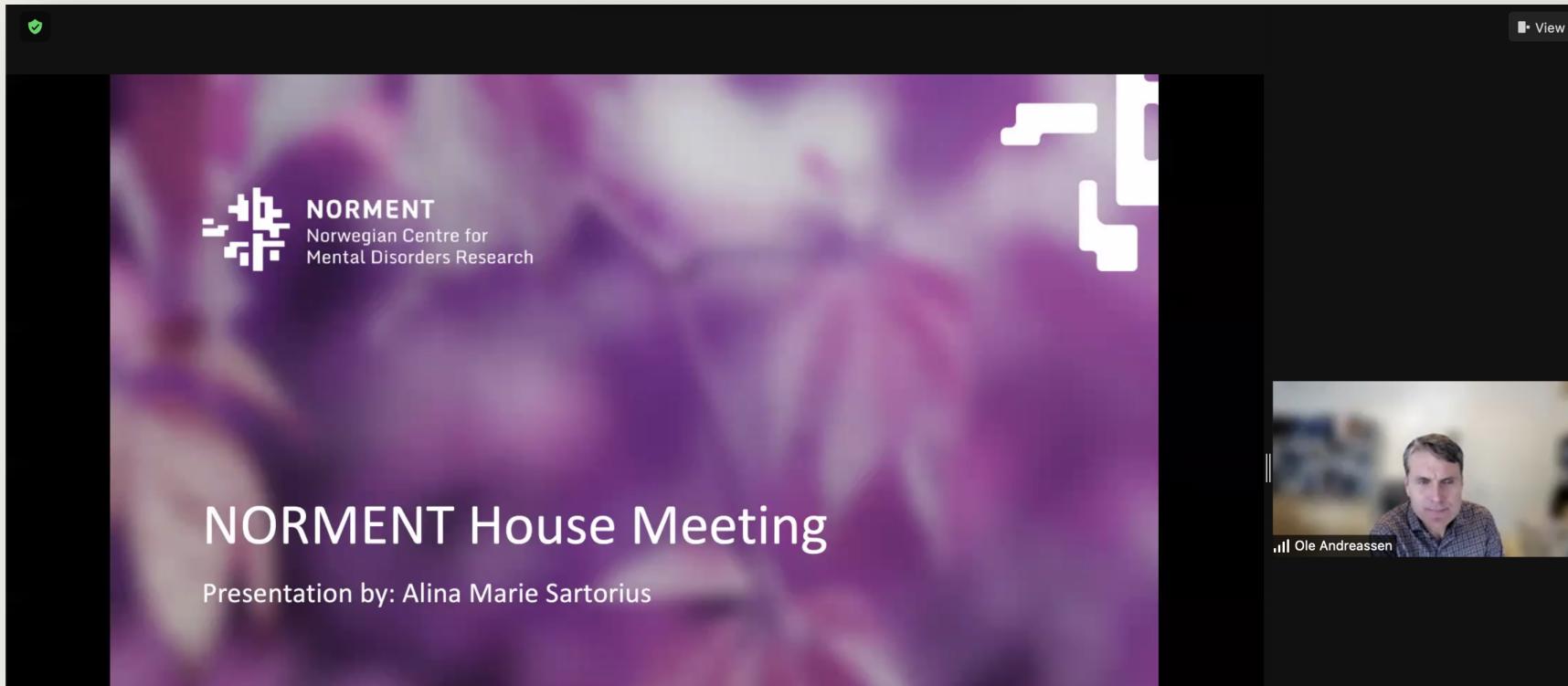
Presentation



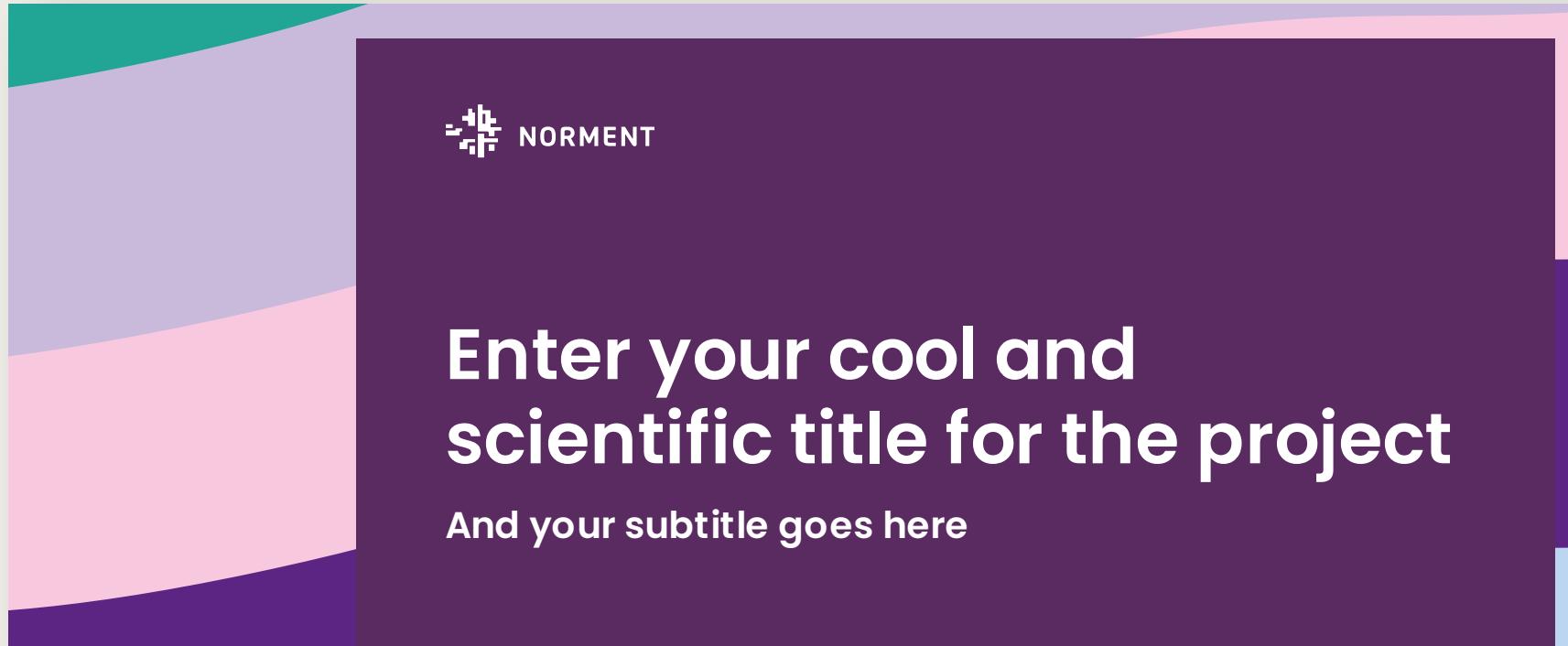
Twitter



Don't use 4x3 aspect ratio when presenting on Zoom



The original NORMENT template is outdated



Data goes before aesthetics

Trust your gut

Fabio Crameri - Scientific Color maps (+ paper)

Thomas Lin Pedersen - `{scico}` (R package with scientific color maps)

Yan Holtz - From Data to Viz (decision tree for figure format, + R code)

Cédric Scherer - Visualizing Distributions with Raincloud Plots (`{ggplot2}`-based tutorial)

Lisa Charlotte Muth - Which color scale to use when visualizing data (part of 4-part series for Datawrapper)

Lisa Charlotte Muth - An alternative to pink & blue: Colors for gender data (for Datawrapper)

Nguyen Gobber - How to Design Scientific Posters? (pdf)

Dirma Janse - The Science Poster Design Guide (book + website)

Butterick's Practical Typography (everything you need to know about fonts)

Slidesgo.com (free Powerpoint templates. They're not all good but they can serve as inspiration)

Slides.com (web-based alternative to Powerpoint)

HEADERS

Lato - font weight 900 (black) - uppercase - color #1F1F1F ●

Body text

Poppins - font weight 400 (regular) - color #1F1F1F ●

Code text

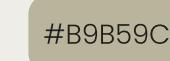
Input Mono - font weight 400 (regular)



primary accent



secondary accent



analogous accent



Thank you!

