Graphics Principles Cheat Sheet v1.1

Communication

Effective visualizations communicate complex statistical and quantitative information facilitating insight, understanding, and decision making.

But what is an effective graph?

This cheat sheet provides general guidance and points to consider.

Planning

Why – Clearly identify the purpose of the graph, e.g. to deliver a message or for exploration?

What – Identify the quantitative evidence to support the purpose

Who – Identify the intended audience (specialists, non-specialists, both) and focus the design to support their needs

Where – Adapt the design to space or formatting constraints (e.g. clinical report, slide deck or publication)

Principles of Effective Graphic Design

Proximity – group related elements together

Alignment – elements on the same vertical or horizontal plane are perceived as having similar properties

Simplicity – cut anything superfluous, only include elements that add value, limit to 2-3 colors or fonts

White space (empty space) – use white space to minimize distraction & provide clarity

Legibility – sans serif fonts are easier to read, use color for emphasis instead of a new typeface

Color – select colors that present enough contrast to make the graph legible. Choose monochromatic color schemes to prevent clashing. Use dark colors and accent colors to emphasize important information

Visual Hierarchy – use color, font, image size, typeface, alignment & placement to create a viewing order

Focal Points – primary area of interest that immediately attracts the eye, emphasize the most important concept and make it your focal point. Use contrasting colors to draw attention

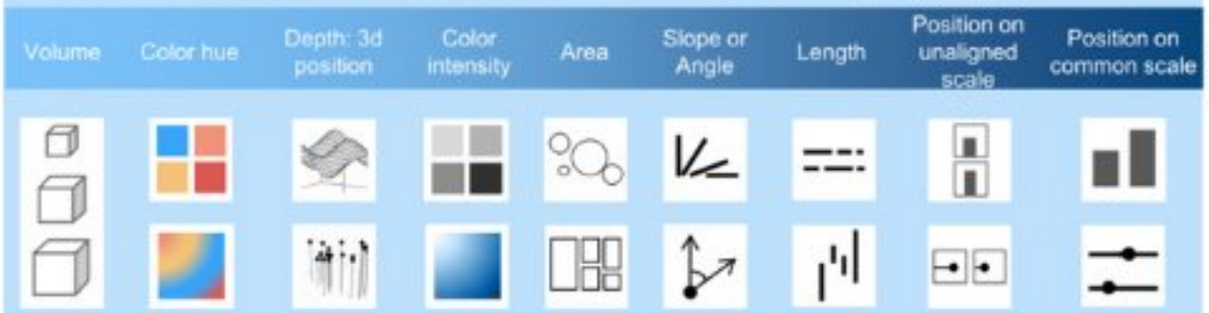
Repetition – repeating elements can be visually appealing, repeated shapes, labels, colors

Familiarity – using familiar styles, icons, navigation structure makes viewers feel confident

Consistency – be consistent with heading sizes, font choices, color scheme, and spacing. Use images with similar styles

Effectiveness Ranking

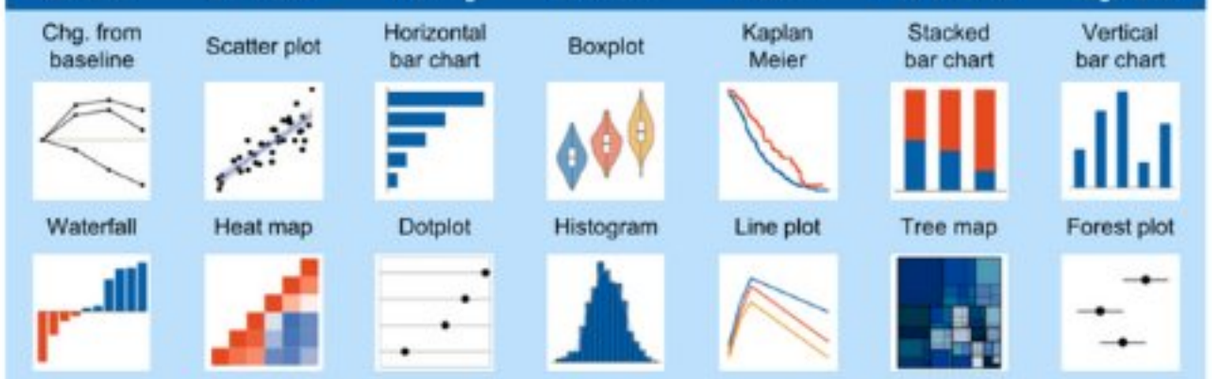
A graph is a representation of data that visually encodes numerical values into attributes such as lines, symbols and colors. The Cleveland-McGill scale can be used to select the most effective attribute(s) for your purpose.



Selecting the right base graph

Consider if a standard graph can be used by identifying suitable designs based on the:
(i) **purpose** (i.e. message to be conveyed or question to answer) and (ii) **data** (i.e. variables to display).

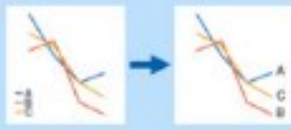
Example plots categorized by purpose



Facilitating Comparisons

Proximity improves association

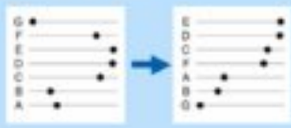
Place labels next to data instead of using legends



Group together elements to be compared directly

Ease visual inspection

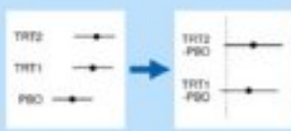
Order values to help compare across many categories



Judgments are easier to make on a common vertical scale

Reduce mental arithmetic

Plot the final comparison e.g. mean difference not two means
Exception: if comparator is of interest in itself



Use reference lines and other visual anchors.

Color for emphasis or distinction

Restrained use of color is highly effective in organizing a narrative and calling attention to certain elements.

Think carefully before introducing additional color. Do you really need it?

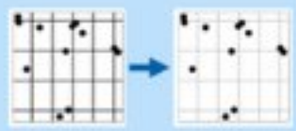
Do not use color to differentiate between categories of the same variable

Use colors or shades to represent meaningful differences such as positive/negative values, treatments or doses

Be consistent, use the same color to mean the same thing in a series of graphs (e.g. treatment, dose)

Use a bold, saturated or contrasting color to emphasize important details.

Emphasize the data by minimizing unnecessary ink, e.g. soften gridlines with a light color



Utilize existing resources for selection of appropriate palettes such as
Color brewer
or Munsell

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