

What's Going on in This Graph?

Now that you've been introduced to a variety of charts and graphs, let's explore some compelling examples of how data is visualized in the real world. The Learning Network from The New York Times has created an ongoing segment titled "[What's Going On in This Graph?](#)" to encourage discussion over graphs posted by The Times. From [climate change](#) to [nutritional perspectives](#) to [essay publishing](#), each graph poses a series of questions to initiate dialogue and critical thinking to determine what the visualization is trying to convey. We recommend that you delve into some of the graphs and thoroughly consider what each visualization has to offer.

Modern Infographics

The word infographic comes from a combination of the words “information” and “graphic”. While there are no clear definitions for infographics, generally, these figures should display information with varying levels complexity and sophistication to the viewer in a clear and concise way.

This modern--or not so modern-- technique can take many shapes and forms. Infographics themselves are not a new concept; many basic forms of infographics were first introduced in the 1800s. In fact, many of the charts that you have seen and will see in this course are simple infographics, like pie charts, bar charts, histograms, and scatter plots. Objects such as weather and subway maps are standard ways of displaying and distributing large, complex amounts of information clearly and quickly to users. Well-designed weather maps, for example, are especially helpful in that consistent coloring allows for quick comprehension of information.

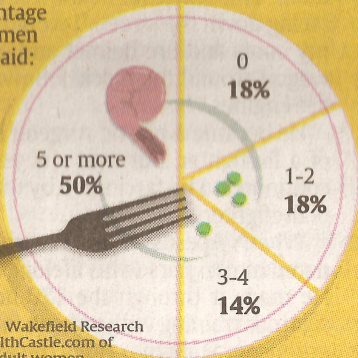


[Boston, MA Doppler Weather Radar Map - Accuweather.com](#) by [charlene mcbride](#) licensed under [CC BY 2.0](#)

One of the innovations to the infographic that increased its visibility is the development of the USA Snapshots by USA Today in 1982 to add images to simple graphs. The increased illustrations and colors added eye-appeal and extra interest in the information presented. The use of color images in newspapers are often limited to the front and back page of each newspaper, so these graphics were often seen by consumers of the newspaper.

How many diets have you tried in your lifetime?

Percentage
of women
who said:



Source: Wakefield Research
for HealthCastle.com of
1,064 adult women

With the internet and the massive explosion of social networking sites, Pinterest, and blogs, along with new tools and programs for image editing, infographics have recently exploded in a different way. These infographics exist in almost every format imaginable, whether it be a timeline or an [extended visualization of which Disney princess contains the best qualities](#) or a [ranking of fruit by tastiness and difficulty of eating](#). These infographics may be published by reputable sources, like [Mott's Children's Hospital](#) or generated by unofficial or untrustworthy sources.

Due to their rise in number, quantity of authors, and questionable reputability, it is important to assess the quality and correctness of infographics. There are many ways in which infographics can lie or suggest stories that are contained within the data itself.

Some quick tips for assessing how good the data in infographics are:

- Look for the source of the information. Are there competing interests?
- Check the scale of the data. Many pieces of information can be hidden or exaggerated based on how the scale is generated.
- While visualizations can be cute, think about how all dimensions of a graph scale. For example, scaling up the height of an object by two will quadruple the two dimensional volume.

So, keep an eye out for infographics in your daily life. During one hour, count how many you see to determine how prevalent they truly are. Assess their correctness based on the underlying data and practice good consumption of information through this format. If you are generating infographics yourself, remember that the clearer you present your information, the clearer and more persuasive your argument will be.

For some of our favorite infographics, check out:

- [How common your birthday is in the US](#)
- [How parents think about organ donation](#)

And if you're interested in learning more, please review the following resources.

For general information about infographics, check out:

- [Infographic history](#)
- [The work of Edward Tufte](#)
- [How to Be an Educated Consumer on Infographics: David Byrne on the Art-science of Visual Storytelling](#)

For more general thoughts on infographics and assessing information, consider looking into:

- [How Statistics Lie](#)
- [Storytelling with Data](#)