Biotext

Making effective infographics

Infographics combine text and visuals to communicate information. An effective infographic is accurate and easy to understand, and sparks interest and action in the audience.

Types of infographics

'Infographic' is a broad term. Understanding the different types is the first step to making a clear and effective infographic:

- **Data infographic** – used to show interesting data when a graph is not engaging enough or cannot capture enough aspects of the data. These can be further divided into
  - dashboards, where various numbers and facts are grouped, and illustrated by icons to make the content more engaging
  - displays, where data is translated into a relevant picture, such as trees of various sizes to show regeneration in different areas.
- **Process infographic** – used to explain how a process or stages of a project work.
- **Message infographic** – used to help readers understand an idea or concept.

Use an infographic when:

- the topic is inherently visual (e.g. fish identification chart)
- describing a complex process (e.g. car repair manual)
- describing an interconnected system (e.g. ecology)
- the content should be understood by people who have little to no written English literacy (e.g. appliance instructions)
- a text explanation is too long or doesn't capture the nuances of the topic.

Don't use an infographic when:

- 1 or 2 well-made figures or sentences is enough
- the topic needs the precision and detail only words can give (e.g. caveats, definitions)
- an 'infographic' is being requested because it's a buzzword
- what is really needed is more engaging overall design of the document or webpage.

How to create an effective infographic

Making effective infographics is an iterative process, involving a subject matter expert, a writer or editor and a designer working together.

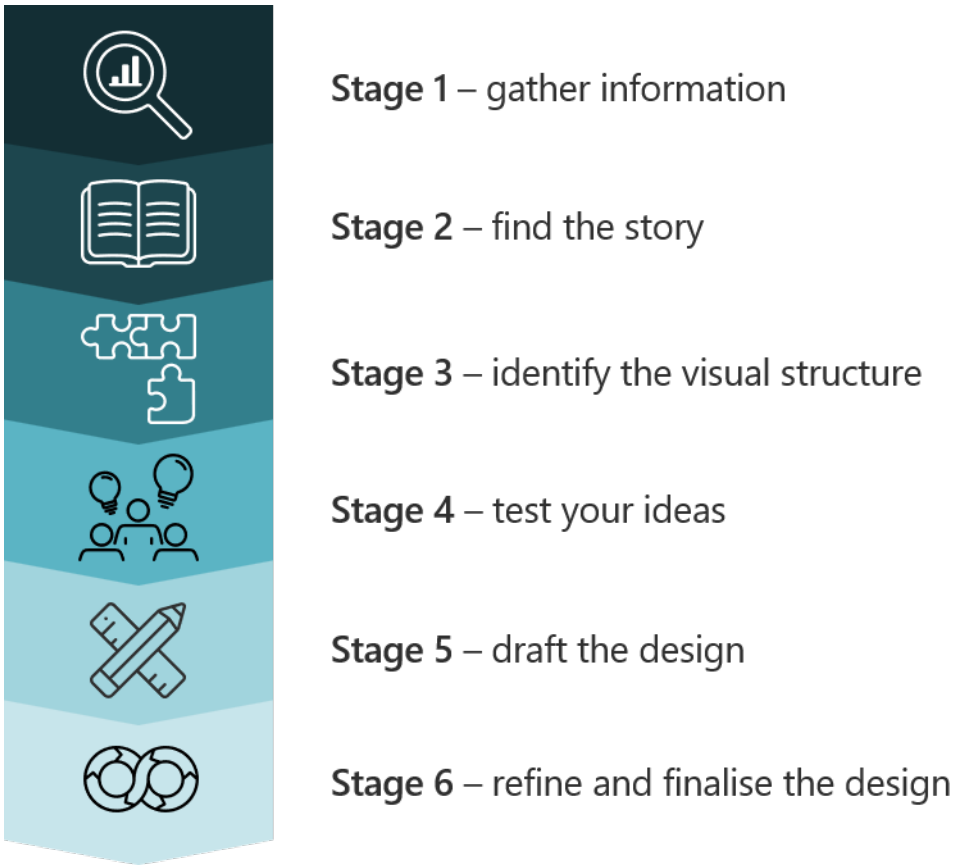
If you're using generative AI to help create an infographic, you still need to know:

- enough about the topic to be able to identify inaccuracies and ambiguity
- what your audience needs to know, how much they already know about the topic, and what type of infographic styles they'll find familiar and easy to interpret
- writing and editing rules to make sure written content uses clear, plain language
- basic design principles to ensure a logical flow of information and to check that design elements don't misrepresent the concept (misplaced arrows, connecting lines and hierarchies can imply relationships where there are none).

This guide can help whether you're using AI tools, working with a designer, or creating the infographic yourself.

The key to an effective infographic is in the planning. Don't expect to produce a fully polished infographic during the brainstorming and drafting stages. Design work is energy intensive, whether you're engaging a graphic designer or using AI tools. Getting the planning right at the start will save time and energy later.

Figure 1 Stages involved in creating an effective infographic



Stage 1 – gather information

The first part of creating an effective infographic is to understand the context. This includes:

- the aim – what do you want to infographic to achieve? What purpose should it serve?
- the audience – who needs to understand it? Experts? Decision makers? Kids? Families?
- how the infographic will be used – how will people view it? Will it be on a webpage, in a report, or part of a presentation?
- your capabilities and resourcing – do you have the subject matter expertise and design capabilities inhouse or will you outsource?

Stage 2 – find the story

Getting the story right is crucial to making an effective infographic. Identify a single key message and focus your infographic on that. You should be able to sum your message up in 1 clear, punchy sentence. You can include other supporting information, as long as it doesn't take the focus (visually) off the main message.

Stage 3 – identify the visual structure

Sketch or describe a layout that will best communicate your message. This could be a visual metaphor, a flowchart, illustrations, a dashboard of graphs and statistics.

Thinking of your message as a metaphor can prompt ideas for effective visuals, especially for complex or abstract messages. Common metaphors include icebergs to represent proportions, and roadmaps or journey trails. Consider what type of metaphor will be relatable to your audience, and make sure it fits your message. Brainstorming with colleagues or users can help. Sketch out a few different options – they don't need to be polished designs at this stage. Include annotations and notes to identify the key parts and how they fit together.

Stage 4 – test your ideas

Share your sketches with different audiences, including some who know the subject matter, and some who don't. The expert audience can tell you if the structure of metaphor accurately reflects the topic, and the non-expert audience can tell you whether it's easy to understand. Choose the most effective idea to refine into a draft.

Stage 5 – draft the design

Work with a designer to turn the sketch into a draft infographic. A designer will make careful decisions about fonts, colours, graphic elements, illustrations, white space and layout. Each of these factors affects how easy the infographic is to interpret, and the feelings it evokes. If you're using AI to generate ideas and draft designs, critique the use of arrows, shapes and layouts that may imply incorrect hierarchies or dependencies between information. Also check for any unnecessary decorative elements which can add to the audience's cognitive load when interpreting the graphic.

Stage 6 – refine and finalise the design

Get feedback on your draft – ideally from the target audience, or people who can represent their needs. Sharing it with friends and colleagues can also give diverse perspectives on what's working and what might need to be refined. The designer refines the design to align style requirements, such as your organisation's brand and visual design guides.

Common infographic pitfalls

Below are some common mistakes that lead to ineffective infographics, and tips to overcome them.

Too many messages and unclear messages

The most common problem we see with infographics is an attempt to cover all aspects and details of a topic. This makes the infographic cluttered and buries the key message. It's better to leave out some details or simplify complex ideas to high-level concepts.

Summarise your key message in writing before you start planning your infographic. This will help keep the focus on what matters, and guide your decisions about what to include and what can be left out.

Too much text

Reading large blocks of text slows the reader's interaction with the infographic and weakens the overall message. Brief text that is well matched to the graphics works better. If more detail is needed, cover it in the accompanying text.

One infographic when several are needed

Breaking down a complex idea into separate panels, or even separate infographics, helps to build users' understanding without overloading them with too much information upfront. This approach is useful if the message is actually a bundle of separate ideas. It's also useful if you find yourself hoping for a single 'summary infographic' which often proves to be overly complicated. A set of visually linked infographics is often the best solution.

Trying to be too close to real life

Icons don't always need to show objects realistically. Often, our brains process symbols and simplified objects more effectively than real-life depictions; for example, the floppy disk is recognised as a symbol for 'save' despite not being an accurate depiction of how files are now saved.

For other types of graphics, different levels of realism will be needed depending on the context. For example, a map-based graphic for a scientific report may need to be accurately scaled and include a legend and scale bar to communicate detailed spatial information, whereas a map for a glossy brochure may be stylised to simply convey the general location.