
Enhancing Your Written Works by Producing Effective Charts

by Jeff Davidson, Carolina Chapter Member



Jeff Davidson

Producing effective charts is essential to any document that conveys technical, scientific, or financial data. Here are four suggestions to ensure that your charts are effective and enhance rather than detract from your document.

1. Create charts and graphs to be free-standing and self-explanatory.

Free-standing means that any reader can understand the information without needing to refer to any supporting text. A chart is self-explanatory when all row and column headings are free of confusing or ambiguous abbreviations. Also, any keys, legends, directions, equations, or footnotes are contained within the chart so that the reader need not look elsewhere for this information.

Also, any calculations or data should follow a logical mathematical progression so that the reader can quickly see how the information was derived. In a table, for example, if the figures in "Column 5" are the product of figures in "Column 3" and "Column 4," this should be clearly indicated.

2. List Sources of Information.

For charts that contain information from secondary sources – not directly based on your own research or findings – list the name of the source or publication, the publisher, the publisher's city and state, the page number (if available), and the year in which the information was published or compiled. For example:

County Statistics, Bureau of the Census, U.S. Department of Commerce, Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, pg. 78, 2000.

This reference can be listed on the bottom-left of the chart page and footnoted to the column in reference.

3. Serve the uninformed but interested third party.

Charts should be prepared so that an uninformed reader - someone who has no previous knowledge of your work or the topic area - can easily examine your chart and determine its meaning. A chart that can be understood by an uninformed, but interested third party guarantees that your primary target audience will find the chart easy to understand. The layout of the chart should be pleasing to the eye by using comfortable margins, white space, centering, and balance. If the chart appears crowded, eliminate non-essential information or create a second chart.

4. Label and date appropriately.

The label, title, or caption to your chart or graph should be appropriate and adequately describe the information being presented. There's nothing worse than a carefully prepared chart with a misleading or awkwardly phrased label or a confusing date. Other supporting information to be included on the chart are the date the chart was prepared, who it was prepared by (the individual or organization), and any other useful reference.

By using these four tips when creating charts and graphs you will help your readers to more easily understand the information the charts are intended to convey.

This article was originally published in the Q1 issue of the Carolina Communique. Jeff Davidson can be reached at jeff@breathingspace.com.