

Design

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Average Reading Time: 10 Minutes

Learning Outcomes

Students will learn

- the principles of good visual design including PARC principles (proximity, alignment, repetition, and contrast)
- how to create and utilize tables and figures including different types of graphs

6.1 Visual Rhetoric and Document Design

We live in a visual world where every person with access to a computer has all the necessary tools to produce a quality product; our audiences expect quality work and we must meet their expectations. John McWade, author of *Before and After Page Design* adds, "Design has always been important, but the computer has put it center stage. It's no longer enough to have a good product; it must be a good looking product" (*Before and After Page Design*). He continues, "The computer has made designers of all of us." So, how can you embrace your new designer role?

The Joshua Tree Principle



Designer Robin Williams tells this story, "Many years ago I received a tree identification book for Christmas. I was at my parent's home, and after all the gifts had been opened I decided to go out and identify the trees in the neighborhood. Before I went out, I read through part of the book. The first tree in the book was the Joshua tree because it only took two clues to identify it. Now the Joshua tree is a really weird-looking tree and I looked at the picture and said to myself, 'Oh, we don't have that kind of tree in Northern California. That is a weird-looking tree. I would know if I saw that tree, and I've never seen one before.' So I took my book and went outside. My parents live in a cul-de-sac of six homes. Four of those homes had Joshua trees in the front yard. I had lived in that house for thirteen years, and I had never seen a Joshua tree. I took a walk around the block, and there must have been a sale at the nursery when everyone was landscaping their new homes—at least 80 percent of the homes had Joshua trees in the front yards. And I had never seen one before! Once I was conscious of the tree, once I could name it, I saw it everywhere. Which is exactly my point. Once you can name something you are conscious of it. You have power over it. You own it. You're in control."

I couldn't agree more! Once we have vocabulary to identify something, we can see and use that principle. Rebecca Hagen and Kim Golombisky, authors of *White Space is Not Your Enemy: A Beginners Guide to Communicating Visually Through Graphic, Web, and Multimedia Design* write,

"Visual Culture is a language, and like any language, visual culture has rules that make communication possible" (p. 2).

In our visually dense world, your document's appearance—its design and visual impact—matters, even in academic writing. This Purdue OWL PowerPoint gives advice for technical writers but the principles it teaches apply to us social science writers too.

As Social Science writers, we will create documents for a wide array of audiences; documents that will need to meet diverse needs, values, and audience expectations. Document Design (vocabulary) we must understand and own are

- serif font
- [san serif](#) font
- decorative font
- columns
- gutters

- bullets
- headings

Williams created an acronym (PARC) to teach us basic design principles.

PARC design principles

Proximity (Grouping)

Items relating to each other should be grouped close together. When several items are in close proximity to each other, they become one visual unit rather than several separate units. This helps organize information, reduces clutter, and gives the reader a clear structure.

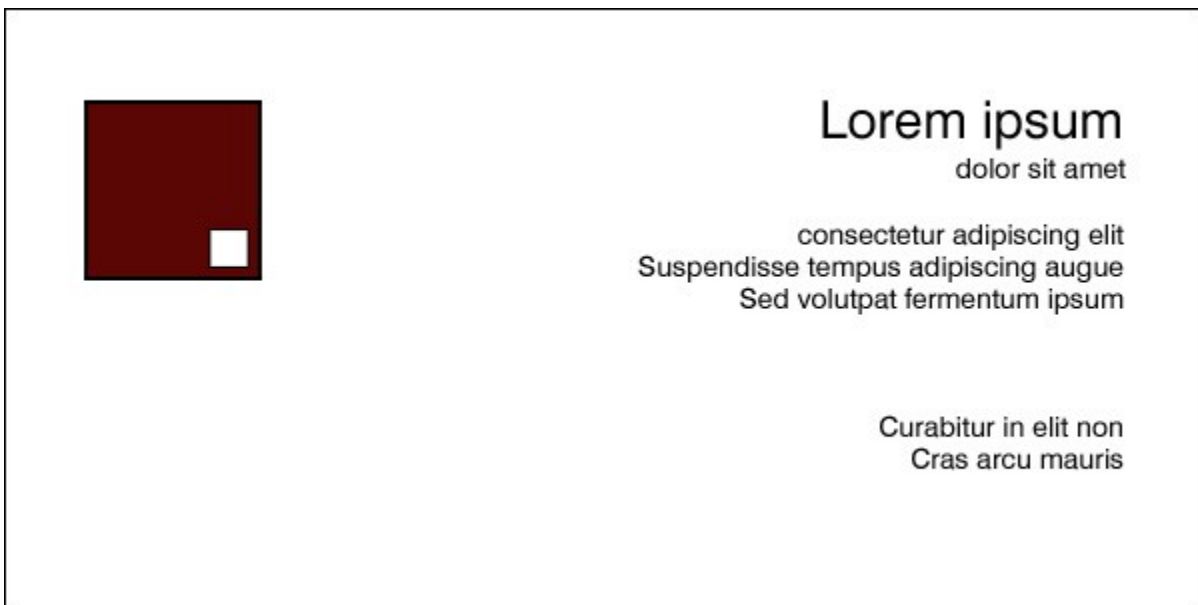


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Alignment

Nothing should be placed on the page arbitrarily. Every element should have some visual connection with another element on the page. This creates a clean, sophisticated, fresh look.

Poor page layout;
no visual hierarchy

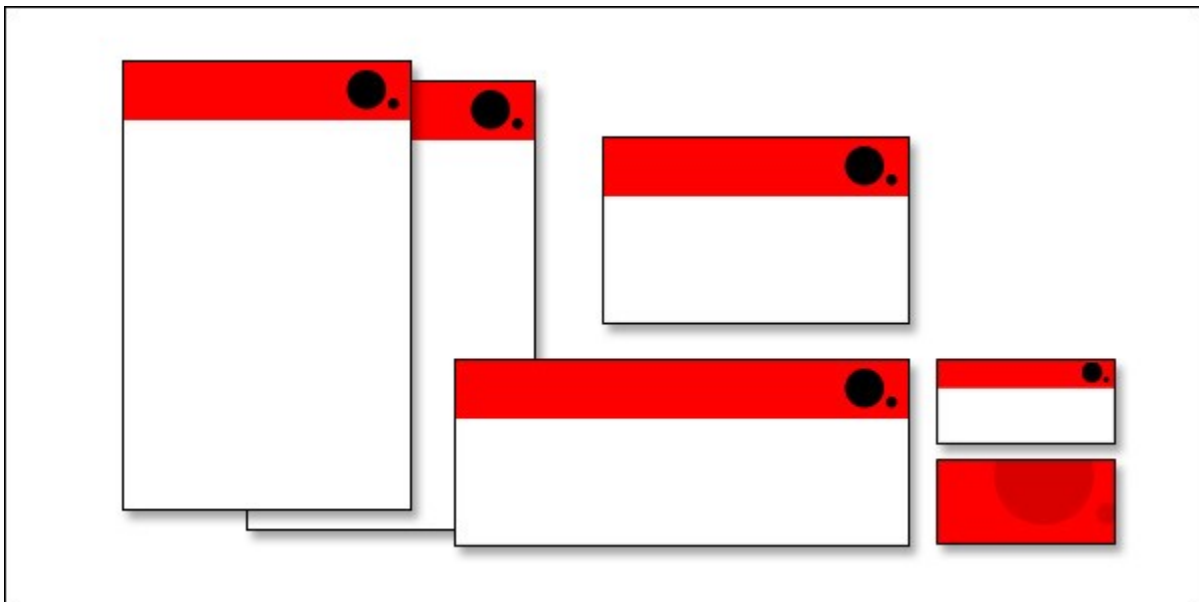


Better layout; predictable, modular,
clear visual structure



Repetition (Consistency)

Repeat visual elements of the design throughout the piece. You can repeat colors, shapes, textures, spatial relationships, line thicknesses, fonts, sizes, graphic concepts, etc. This develops the organization and strengthens the unity.



Contrast

The idea behind contrast is to avoid elements on a page that are merely *similar*. If the elements (type, color, size, line thickness, shape, space, etc.) are not the *same*, then make them **very different**. Contrast is often the most important visual attraction on a page—it's what makes the reader look at a page in the first place.



William's jokingly claims that designers who don't effectively use these PARC design principles get CRAP (PARC spelled backwards). John McWade adds, "Designed correctly, the paper does not appear to be designed at all; what the reader perceives is power and presence. Poor design is like smog. You can see air only when it's dirty. When it's clean it's invisible and you see the fantastic mountains, unaware of the air at all" (Before and After Page Design).

Writers must develop document design skills as 21st Century rhetorical communicators.

[Presentation Guru, Garr Reynolds expands on these concepts.](#)

Additional Page Design tips

- Use the right paper and ink.
- Use consistent page numbers, headers, and footers.
- Use ample and appropriate margins (Leave a one-inch margin around the page).
- Use ragged rather than justified right margins.
- Use list format for easy reading.
- Keep reasonable line length.
- Keep consistent line spacing.
- Use adequate white space to balance the density of print and make the page inviting. (In document design, negative space is often referred to as *white space*).
- Use white space consistently to show organization and hierarchy of ideas.
- Set off headings with white space.

As we study and learn about the basic principles of design our skills will improve.

Ask Yourself

What design skills do you already possess?

Tables and Figures

We use tables, graphs and timelines in Social Studies to . . .

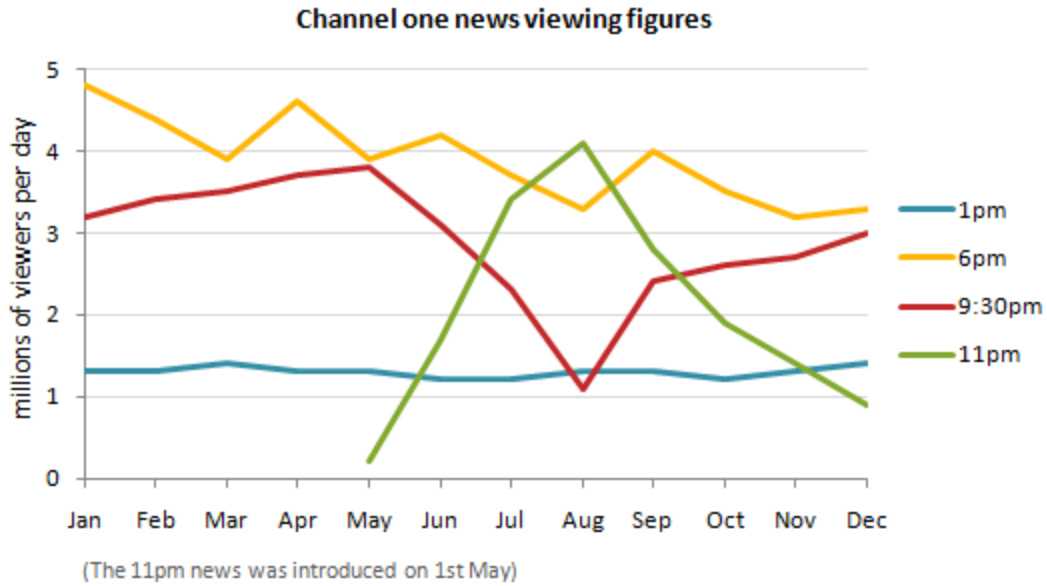


1. Help us better understand data
2. Compare data from the same time period
3. Represent specific facts visually
4. Interpret why something occurred or is occurring
5. Make predictions about events that happened
6. Shows how parts are compared to one another

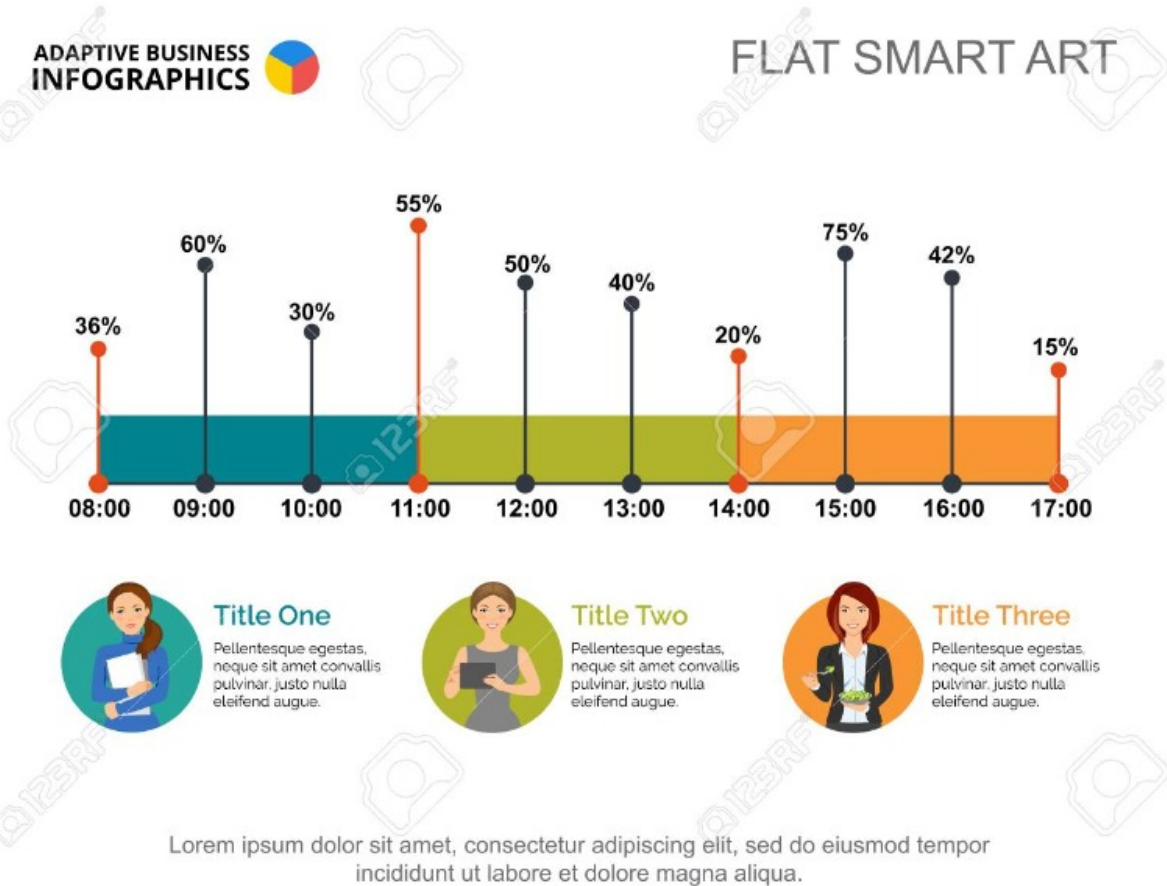
Types of Graphics

Individuals serving an aggregate period of active duty after September 10, 2001, of:	Percentage of Maximum Benefit Payable
At least 36 months	100
At least 30 continuous days and discharged due to service connected disability	100
At least 30 months < 36 months	90
At least 24 months < 30 months	80
At least 18 months < 24 months	70
At least 12 months < 18 months	60
At least 6 months < 12 months	50
At least 90 days < 6 months	40

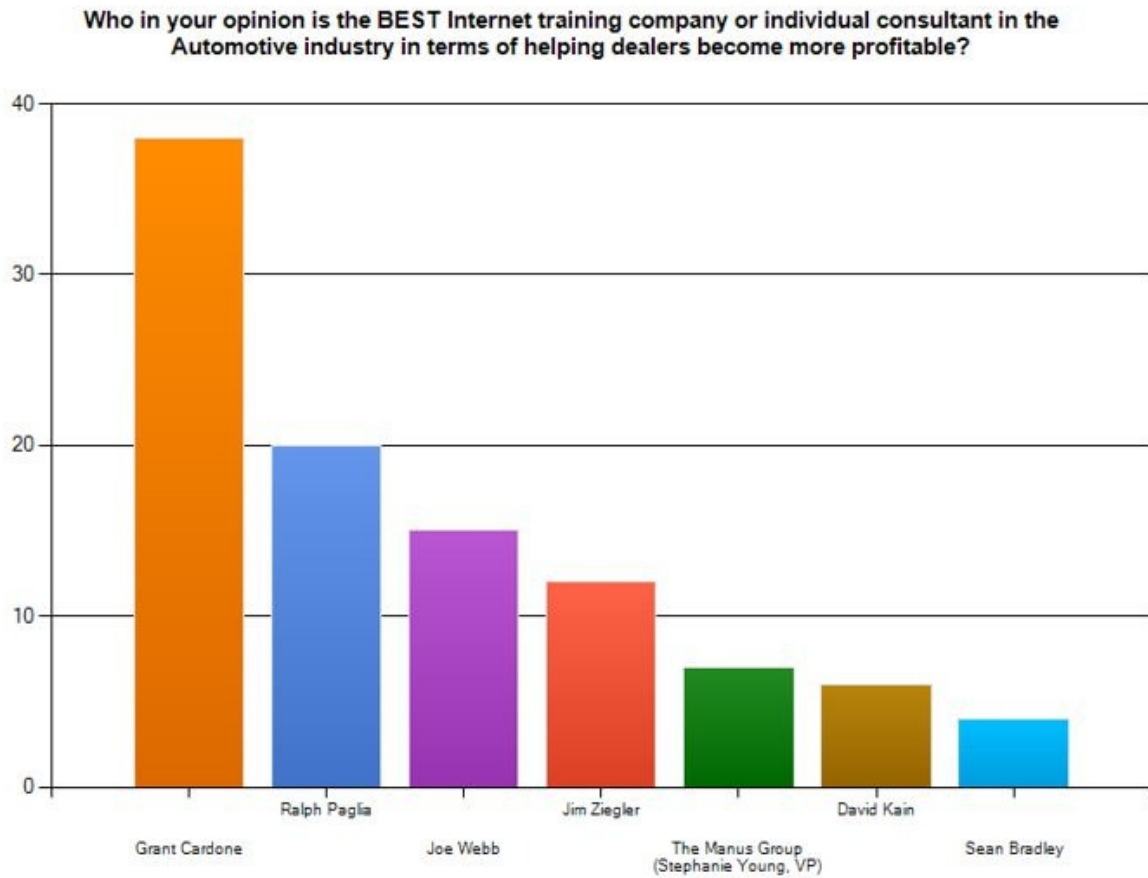
Tables: Tables display data and enable readers to compare data quickly and easily (or at least they should!). Poorly designed tables can be a mess of numbers, columns, and rows that cause more confusion than clarity. Therefore, it's important to decide before you design what you want the table to SAY. While it's unethical to manipulate tables to convey data inaccurately, you can make design decisions that present data clearly to help readers understand what you're trying to say. Remember that text and visuals work together to help readers understand complex information so they can make decisions.



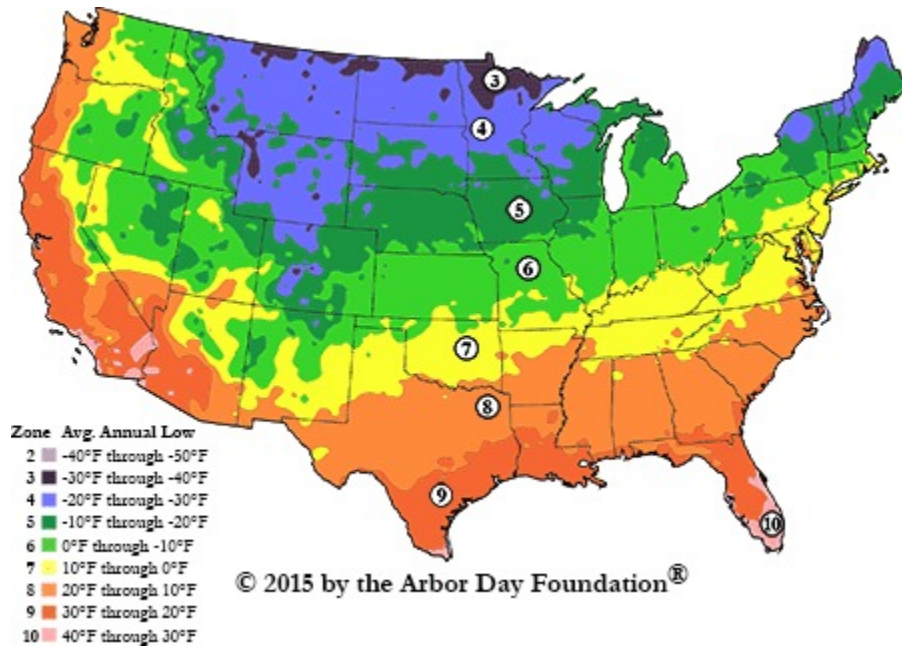
Line Graphs: Line graphs show relationships among types of data, such as the change in quantity (e.g., revenue) over time. Data are divided into logical unites on the vertical and horizontal axes.



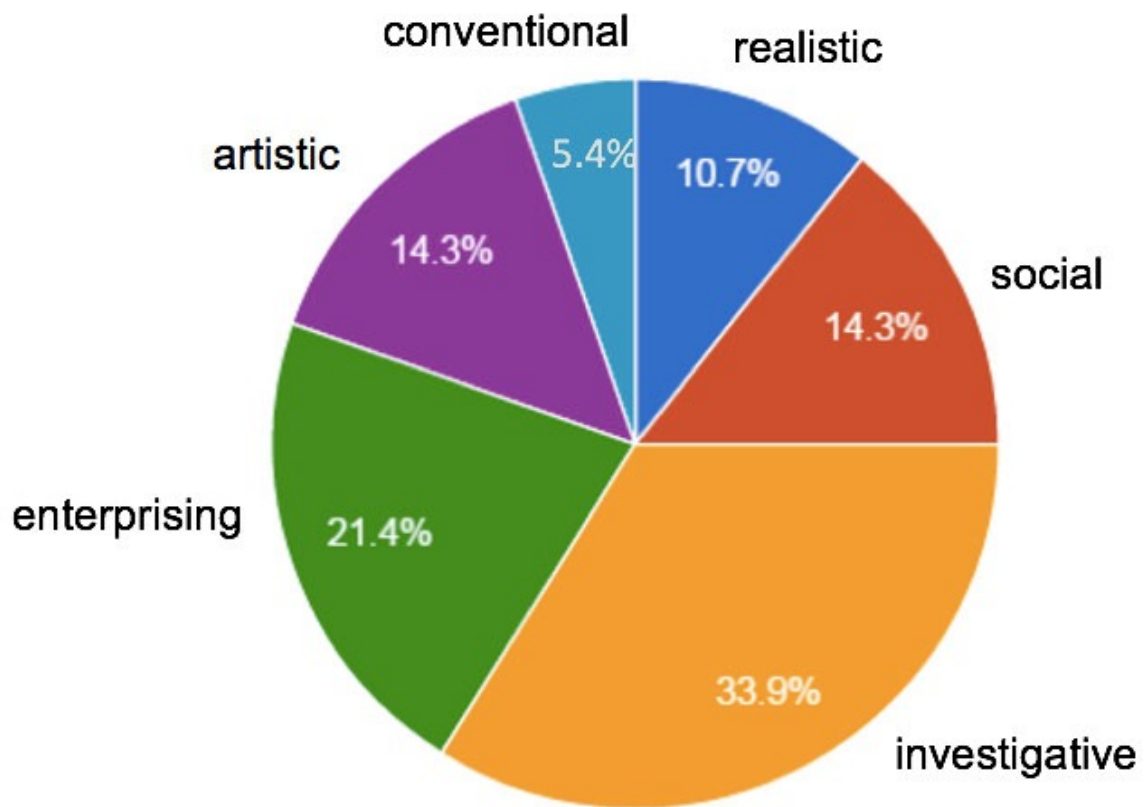
Timelines: Organize events in a linear fashion. They show what happens first, second, third, fourth, and so on.



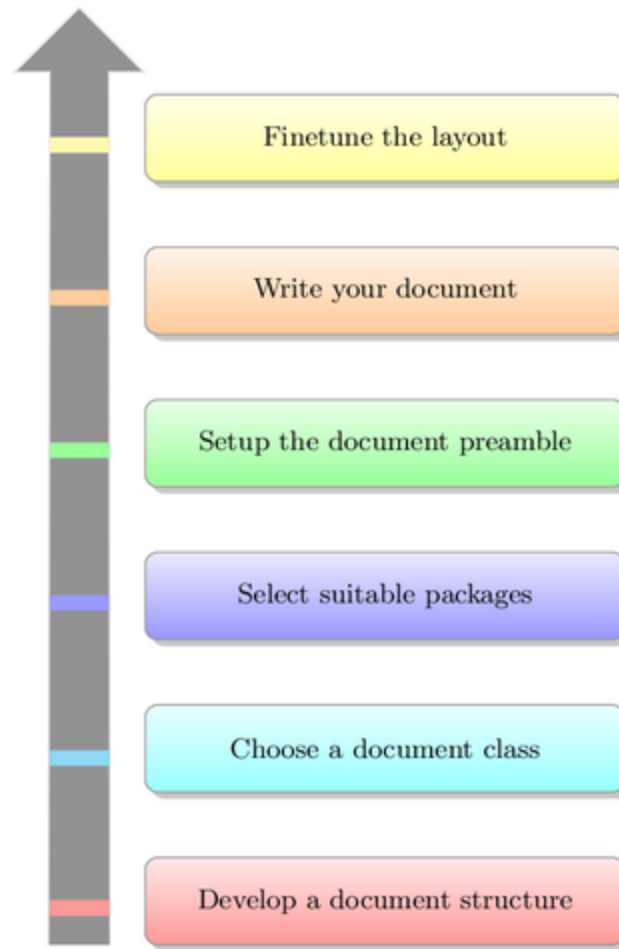
Bar Graphs: Bar graphs show comparative relationships across a data set, correlated with a common reference point. For example, a bar graph could show how much time people in different fields spent writing at their jobs.



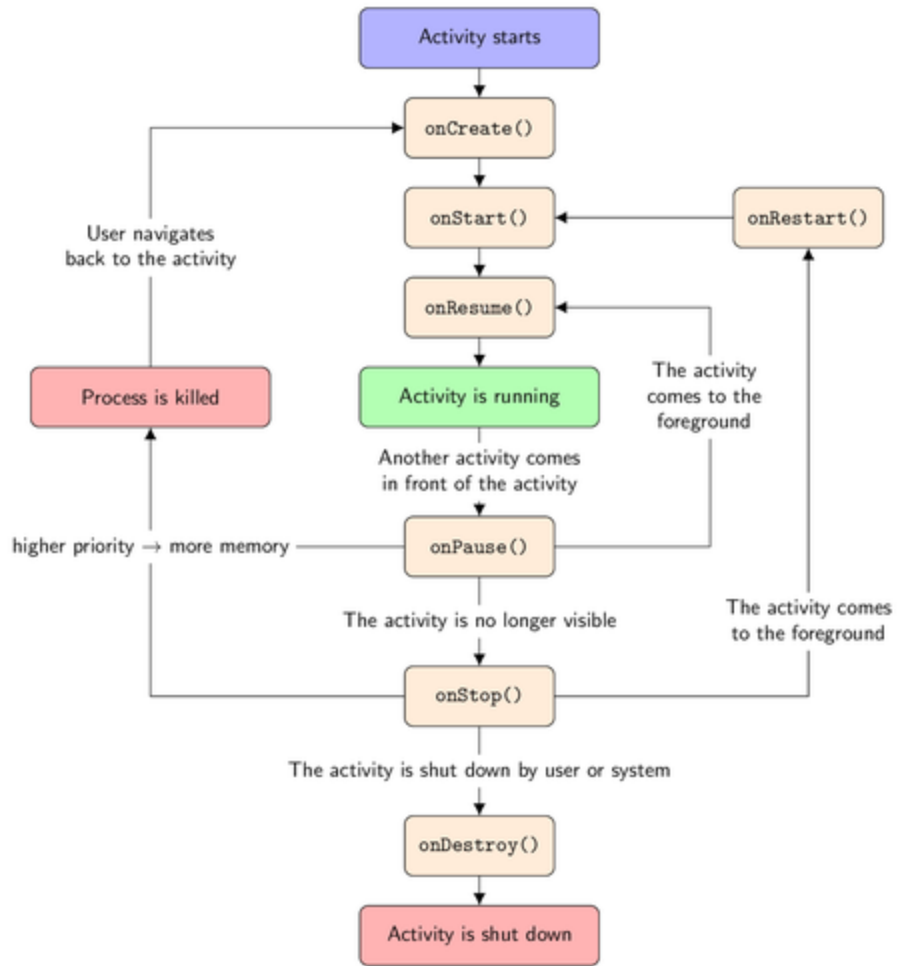
Maps: Maps are visual illustrations of physical space (such as a city or mall). Maps are also used to associate a region or idea with an event, action, or other phenomenon. So, for example, neuroscientists might develop a cognitive map that shows what parts of the brain perform which functions.



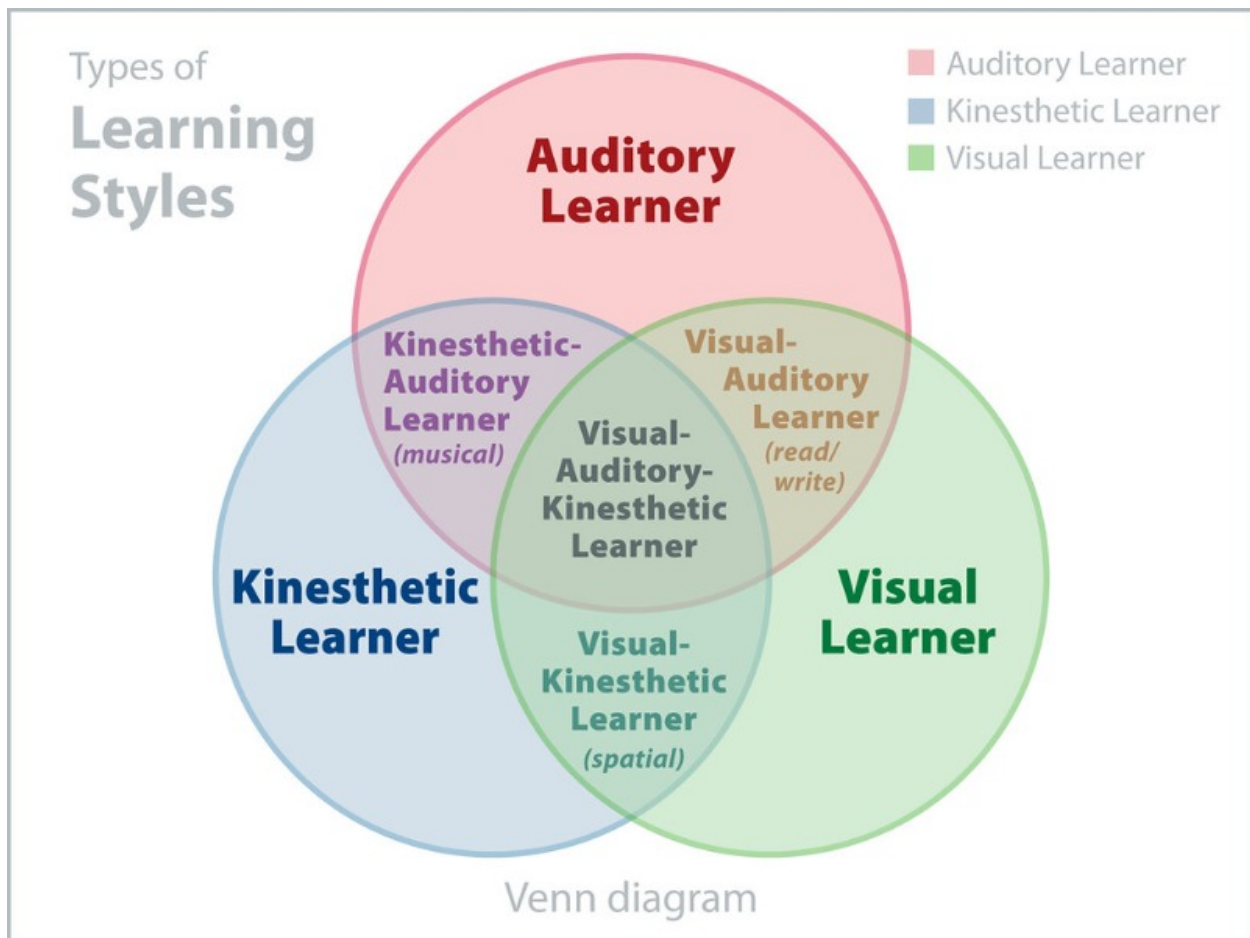
Pie Graphs:



Flow Charts: Flowcharts include visual illustrations and arrows to show how a process unfolds over time or how one idea or action leads to another. Flowcharts help writers show the steps in a process.



Diagrams: Diagrams are illustrations of something that consists of parts (such as an engine). They provide readers with orientation and perspective.



Venn Diagrams: Venn diagrams use circles or arcs to show how one thing intersects or overlaps with something else. They are also used to show relationships, commonalities and differences.

How to use visuals

Visuals should be chosen with consideration of how they will help you accomplish your rhetorical goals, and they should serve a specific purpose. You will need to decide whether to include visuals at all and, if you do include them, which kind of visuals you need and how to present them. Remember these guidelines from the OWL presentation in 6.1:

1. Every image should serve a specific function (graphics provide information—not decoration).
2. Always introduce and explain visuals.
3. Caption every visual.
4. Include copyright and permission information.
5. Proofread all visual information.
6. Leave enough white space around the image.

Tips for reading Visuals

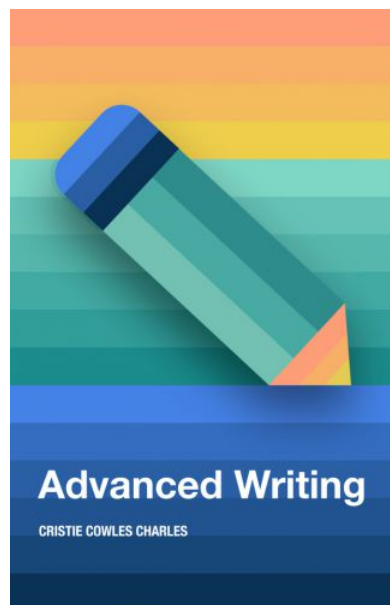
1. Read the title or heading of the visual first. This will indicate the topic of the graphic or the type of information presented.

2. Read all the labels on the visual. The labels tell you what each line, mark, or section on the graphic represents.
3. Read any other text that has been written on or around the graphic. Writers often provide short explanations for the different parts of the graphic.

Graphics make complex information easier to read and understand, but it's imperative to design and study graphics carefully. Poorly designed graphics range from misleading to downright humorous.

Ask Yourself

What type of chart or graph could you design in your literature review to make information more understandable?



Larsen, J. (2020). Design. In C. C. Charles (Ed.), *Advanced Writing*. EdTech Books. Retrieved from https://edtechbooks.org/advancedwriting/design_2



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