

the Power of Infographics

Using pictures to
communicate and
connect with
your audiences

Foreword by Guy Kawasaki, author of *Enchantment*
and former chief evangelist of Apple

que

Mark Smiciklas



the **Power** of **Infographics**

Using Pictures to Communicate
and Connect with Your Audiences

Mark Smiciklas

que[®]

800 East 96th Street, Indianapolis, Indiana 46240 USA



THE POWER OF INFOGRAPHICS

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ISBN-13: 978-0-7897-4949-9

ISBN-10: 0-7897-4949-1

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is on file and available upon request.

Printed in the United States of America

First Printing: July 2012

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CONTENTS AT A GLANCE

Foreword by Guy Kawasakixiii

SECTION I: VISUAL COMMUNICATION

1 Infographics 1013

SECTION II: BUSINESS INFORMATION NEEDS

2 Visualizing Numbers and Concepts 21

3 Visualizing How Things Work and Are Connected 35

4 Visualizing Who, When, and Where 57

SECTION III: CREATING INFOGRAPHICS

5 Infographic Prep Work 75

6 Processing Your Ideas 87

7 Designing Your Infographics 99

8 Publishing Your Infographics 119

SECTION IV: BUSINESS VALUE

9 Infographics as an Internal and External Communication Tool 137

10 Infographic ROI 157

11 Infographic Resources 165

Index 189

TABLE OF CONTENTS

SECTION I: VISUAL COMMUNICATION

1	INFOGRAPHICS 101	3
	What Are Infographics?	3
	Infographics Defined	3
	Infographic History	6
	The Science of Visualization	7
	Hardwiring	7
	Easy on the Mind	7
	Visual Learning	11
	Why Infographics Work for Business	12
	Easy to Digest	12
	Shareability	15
	The “Cool” Factor	16
	Endnotes	16

SECTION II: BUSINESS INFORMATION NEEDS

2	VISUALIZING NUMBERS AND CONCEPTS	21
	Statistics	21
	Using Data to Tell a Story	22
	The Benefits of Visualizing Research	24
	Understanding the Risks	25
	Ideas and Concepts	26
	Using Visual Metaphors	27
	Using Cartoons to Communicate Your Ideas	30
	Case Study: The Kronos “Time Well Spent” Cartoon Series	33
	Endnotes	34
3	VISUALIZING HOW THINGS WORK AND ARE CONNECTED	35
	Process	35
	The Jargon Dilemma	37
	Infographics Help Explain What You Do	38
	Hierarchy	42
	Business Hierarchies	42

Relationships	47
Simplified Systems Thinking	49
Business Models	49
Endnotes	55
4 VISUALIZING WHO, WHEN, AND WHERE	57
Personality	57
Brand Humanization	58
Infographic Resumes	60
Chronology	65
Business Timelines	65
Geography	69
Business Maps	69
Endnotes	72

SECTION III: CREATING INFOGRAPHICS

5 INFOGRAPHIC PREP WORK	75
Purpose	77
Understanding Your Audiences' Information Needs	77
Audience Analysis	77
Setting Infographic Objectives	79
The Art of Observation	82
Seeing	82
Listening	83
Endnotes	86
6 PROCESSING YOUR IDEAS	87
Recording Your Thoughts	87
I'm Not an Artist	87
Different Ways to Document	88
Info-Synthesis	90
The Five W's (and One H) of Infographics	94
Endnotes	98
7 DESIGNING YOUR INFOGRAPHICS	99
The Critics	99
Infographic DIY	100
An Infographic Rant	100
The DIY Infographic Formula	103

Outsourcing	108
Going Pro	109
Working with Students	114
Endnotes	118
8 PUBLISHING YOUR INFOGRAPHICS	119
Audience Research	119
Online Publishing Channels	120
Infographic Home Base	122
Infographic Outposts	126
Offline Publishing Opportunities	133
Endnotes	133

SECTION IV: BUSINESS VALUE

9 INFOGRAPHICS AS AN INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL COMMUNICATION TOOL	137
Using Infographics to Build Your Brand	137
The Business of Infographics	138
Content Marketing	139
Promoting Your Infographics	148
Infographics Inside the Organization	153
Internal Adoption of Infographics	153
Internal Communication Opportunities	154
Endnotes	155
10 INFOGRAPHIC ROI	157
Measuring the VOI (Value of Infographics)	159
Tangible Metrics	160
Intangible Benefits	163
11 INFOGRAPHIC RESOURCES	165
Guide to Visual Elements	165
Infographic Tools	175
Visualization Tools	175
Design Elements	178
Further Reading	179
<i>The Back of the Napkin: Solving Problems and Selling Ideas with Pictures</i>	179
<i>Creating More Effective Graphs</i>	179
<i>Envisioning Information</i>	180

<i>Graph Design for the Eye and Mind</i>	180
<i>Information Graphics: A Comprehensive Illustrated Reference</i>	180
<i>Information Visualization: Perception for Design</i>	180
<i>Marks and Meaning, version zero</i>	180
<i>Now You See It: Simple Visualization Techniques for Quantitative Analysis</i>	181
<i>Slide:ology: The Art and Science of Creating Great Presentations</i>	181
<i>Visual Language: Global Communication for the 21st Century</i>	181
<i>The Wall Street Journal Guide to Information Graphics: The Dos and Don'ts of Presenting Data, Facts, and Figures</i>	181
Information Designers, Consultants, and Agencies	181
Agencies	182
Freelance Designers	184
Consultants	187
INDEX	189

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Mark Smiciklas is the president of Intersection Consulting, a Vancouver-based digital marketing and communications agency that teaches organizations how to leverage the dynamics of web 2.0 to achieve business goals. He is an established digital marketing and social media practitioner recognized for his visual thinking and strategic, no-nonsense approach. His service offering is framed by core beliefs in listening, stakeholder engagement, trust creation, and employee empowerment. An interest in the evolution of social business continues to motivate him, as does a passion for teaching. Smiciklas has developed and taught social media strategy classes for undergraduates and adult learners at a number of Canadian universities. He also has spoken about a wide variety of digital marketing topics at corporate and public events and workshops. His genuine love of technology and people continues to ignite ongoing learning and new thinking that aim to help individuals and organizations connect with their audiences. Smiciklas hangs out full time at intersectionconsulting.com/blog. He can be found on Twitter at [@Intersection1](https://twitter.com/Intersection1). He is also a regular contributor to socialmediaexplorer.com, the popular digital and social media marketing and online communications blog. He lives in North Vancouver, BC, Canada with his lovely wife, three kids, and Max the dog.

DEDICATION

For Jean, Alexander, Madeleine, and Emily. Your love and support make anything possible.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Writing a book has been an aspiration of mine for a while. This project could not have come to fruition without the help, support, and encouragement of my family, friends, and colleagues.

Thanks to Tammy Dewar at Calliope Learning for her insight and coaching, which helped ignite a latent passion in me for visual thinking. Her encouragement gave me the confidence to start creating and sharing my infographics. Thanks to David Armano at Edelman and darmano.typepad.com, whose idea art and thought leadership around visual literacy have inspired my work.

Thanks to Jason Falls at Social Media Explorer for giving me a platform to share my ideas and helping get this project off the ground.

A huge thank-you to the team at Pearson: Katherine Bull, Romny French, Lori Lyons, and Cindy Teeters. Their patience and support kept me on track and mitigated the stress associated with being a first-time author. Also, thanks to Michael Brito from Edelman and britopian.com for his insight and advice during the editing process.

Also, a monumental shout-out to Guy Kawasaki for writing the foreword.

Thanks to the designers, agencies, and organizations that agreed to share their information designs: Michael Anderson, David Armano, Boost Labs, Calliope Learning, Column Five, Course Hero, DIG360, Eloqua, Tom Fishburne, Dan Gustafson, Kronos, Miovision, MySpace, Shortstack, and TurboTax. Your infographics helped illustrate many of the ideas in the book and really brought the final product to life.

A special thank-you to all the smart folks who invested the time to participate in interviews: Ali Allage, David Armano, Jay Baer, Joe Chernov, Tammy Dewar, Jason Falls, Stephen Few, Tom Fishburne, Mike Harding, Andrew Harnden, Jason Lankow, Joe Pulizzi, Mark Schaefer, Brian Singh, Laura Shea Souza, Tyler Weaver, and Tom Webster. Your ideas, insights, and experiences were invaluable and added important depth and breadth to the book.

Also, thank you to my clients at Intersection Consulting and my colleagues in the Vancouver social media community for their support and kind words.

Last, but certainly not least, thanks to my wife and kids. Your unwavering support, understanding, and encouragement helped make this book possible. Remember, “center of focus.”

I hope you enjoy *The Power of Infographics* and that it helps you learn more about how information design can help you communicate and connect with your audiences. I’d love to hear from you. If you’re interested in chatting about the ideas in this book, please join the conversation at facebook.com/powerofinfographics, or feel free to connect on Twitter at [@Intersection1](https://twitter.com/Intersection1).

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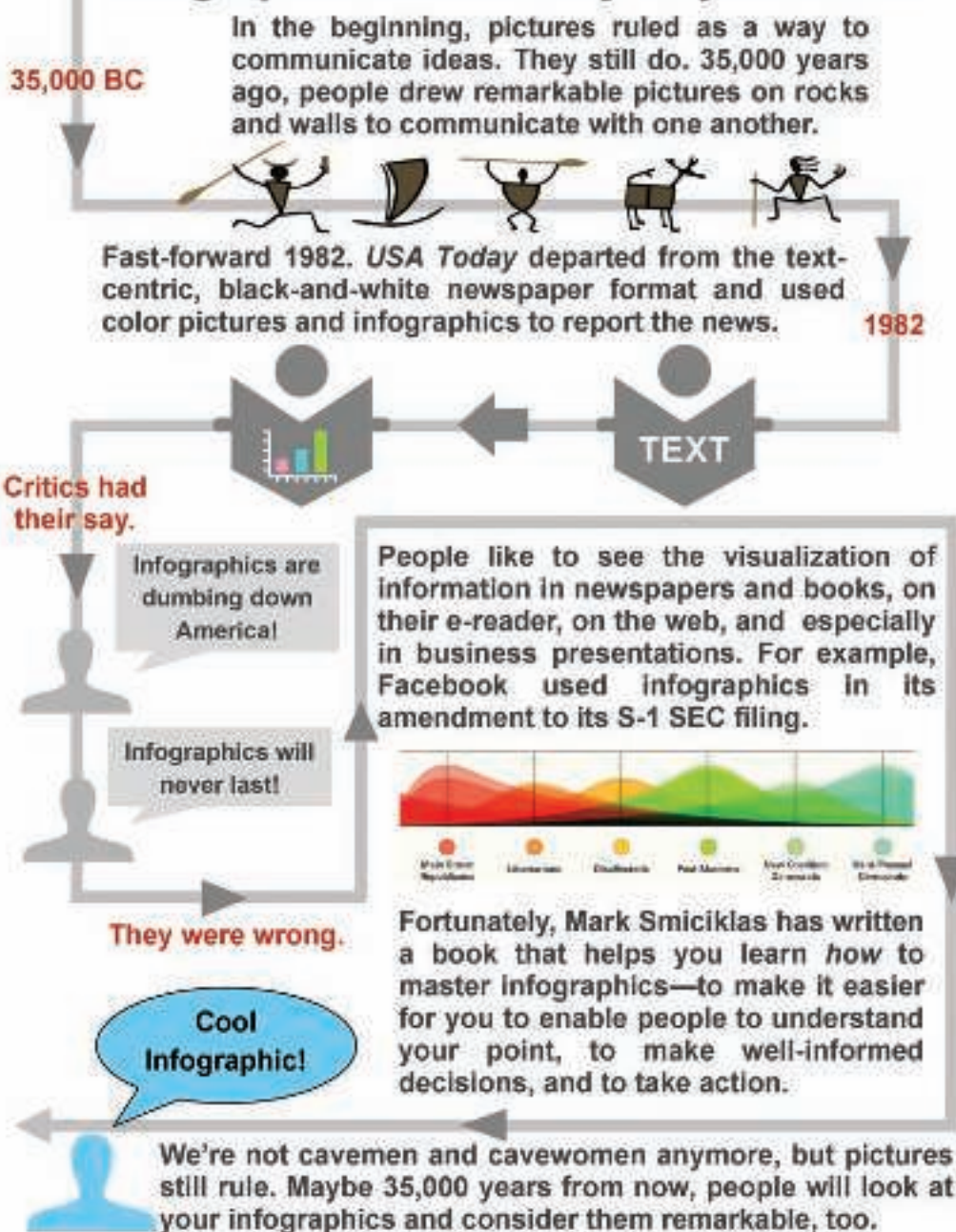
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"Newspaper", "Bar Graph" by Scott Lewis, from TheNounProject.com

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SECTION I

VISUAL COMMUNICATION

1 Infographics 101

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Infographics 101



If you've read a newspaper or blog, flipped through a magazine, or used social media recently, you've likely come across infographics—those self-contained pictorials that tell you the gist of a story or concept at a glance.

But what is their purpose? Are infographics simply eye candy that publishers and brand journalists use to gloss up their content, or do they aim to fulfill a greater business communication objective?

WHAT ARE INFOGRAPHICS?

You've probably heard the phrase "A picture is worth a thousand words," a manifesto that speaks to the value and efficiency of visual communication.

An infographic (short for information graphic) is a type of picture that blends data with design, helping individuals and organizations concisely communicate messages to their audience (see Figure 1.1).

INFOGRAPHICS DEFINED

More formally, an infographic is defined as *a visualization of data or ideas that tries to convey complex information to an audience in a manner that can be quickly consumed and easily understood.*

The process of developing and publishing infographics is called data visualization, information design, or information architecture.

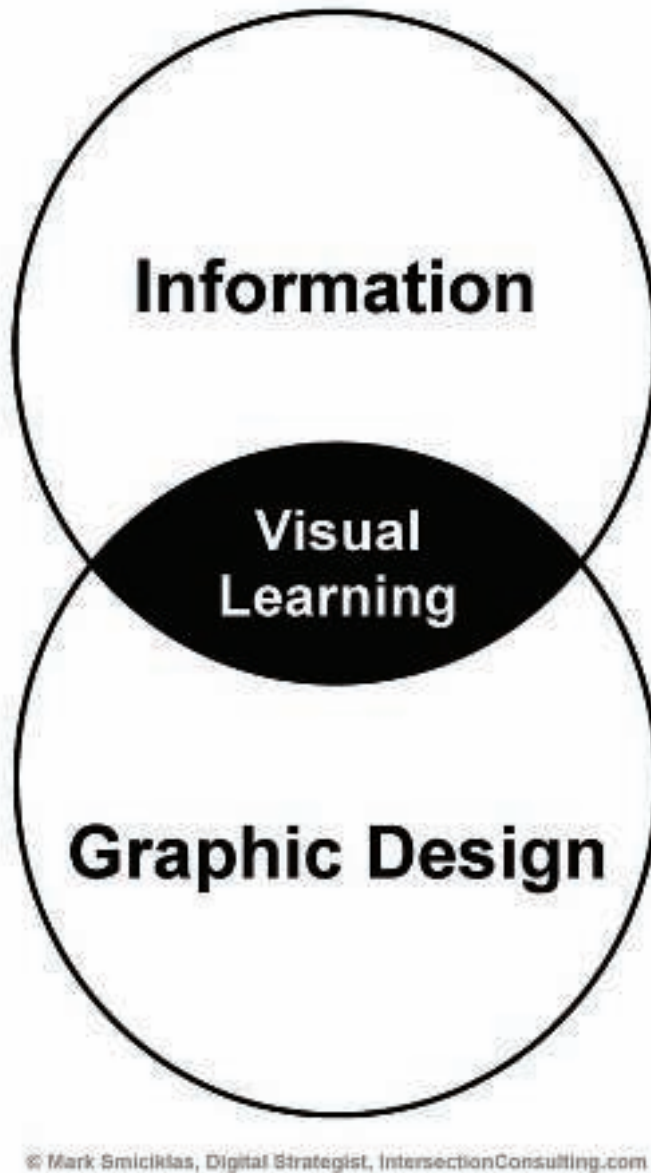


FIGURE 1.1 Anatomy of an infographic.

Infographics combine data with design to enable visual learning. This communication process helps deliver complex information in a way that is more quickly and easily understood.

From a business perspective, one definition of infographics resonates above the rest. British graphic designer, author, and information design theorist Nigel Holmes simply refers to them as “explanation graphics.”

As a marketer, business owner, or manager, you can boil down your communication goals to explaining things to your audience. Infographics can help you communicate the following:

- Thought leadership and product features and benefits to your prospects
- Business process and service options to your customers
- Ideas and policies to your staff
- Corporate philosophy and strategy to your investors

Infographics can help your organization more effectively explain important information to your internal and external stakeholders.

Business Uses

Now that you have a basic understanding of what infographics are, what are some ways you can implement them into your business communication mix?

First, it’s important to understand that infographics are not used solely for external communication. They are a great medium for delivering marketing messages or insights to consumers and prospects, but they are equally effective when used to enhance internal communication.

Before you figure out how you can start using infographics, it helps to understand the nature of the information you are trying to communicate.

Business information can be divided into the following groups:

- **Statistics**—metrics such as sales, revenue, market research, surveys
- **Process**—manufacturing, customer service, sales funnel, lead generation, supply chain
- **Ideas**—concepts, theories, thought leadership, ideology
- **Chronology**—history, order of events, timelines, schedules
- **Geography**—locations, metrics by region
- **Anatomy**—ingredients, components, lists
- **Hierarchy**—organizational structure, needs assessment
- **Relationships**—internal, external, people, products/services
- **Personality**—brand humanization, organizational culture

Many people are familiar with statistics being represented as infographics because of the popularity of data visualization and its use in traditional media. However, business owners, marketers, and managers tend to overlook the use of infographics to communicate other types of information.

The next section delves into information categories in more detail. You will begin to see how infographics can effectively represent different types of business data and how they can become a powerful part of your organization's communication strategy.

INFOGRAPHIC HISTORY

Today, infographics can be used by a wide variety of individuals and organizations to enhance their communication. "Solopreneurs," small businesses, nonprofits, and large corporations can all find ways to use infographics to make their information more interesting and accessible to their target audiences.

You can find infographics published in traditional media such as newspapers and magazines and across digital channels, where social media has helped fuel an explosion in their popularity.

To the casual observer, it would appear that infographics are a recent phenomenon that has been growing in conjunction with the growth of the Internet. The reality is that we have been using icons, graphics, and pictures throughout history to tell stories, share information, and build knowledge, as shown in Figure 1.2.

As we entered the new millennium the publishing of infographics became more democratized, and their use began to extend beyond academia and traditional media channels.

Today, in an era of information overload and shortened attention spans, organizations of all sizes are using infographics to quickly deliver information and understanding to internal and external audiences. Add the fact that social media fuels "shareability," and everything points to infographics becoming one of the most effective forms of content for communicating information in the digital age. (Shareability is explained in greater detail later in this chapter.)

THE SCIENCE OF VISUALIZATION

Brain research related to the physiology of sight and the ways in which we process information using our eyes presents compelling rationale for considering the use of infographics in your business communication mix.

HARDWIRING

Vision is a huge part of the physical brain. Approximately 50% of the brain is dedicated (directly or indirectly) to visual functions.¹

The network of cells, neurons, and fibers that hosts all this activity is truly expansive. Within the eye, the retina alone is made up of more than 150 million cells and is actually a physical extension of the brain. In addition, neurons that are responsible for visual activity take up a large portion of the brain's real estate, representing approximately 30% of our total gray matter. To put this in perspective, neurons for touch and hearing make up only 8% and 3%, respectively.²

EASY ON THE MIND

With all this visual “hardwiring” in place, it makes sense that it would be less complicated for the brain to process infographics than pure text.

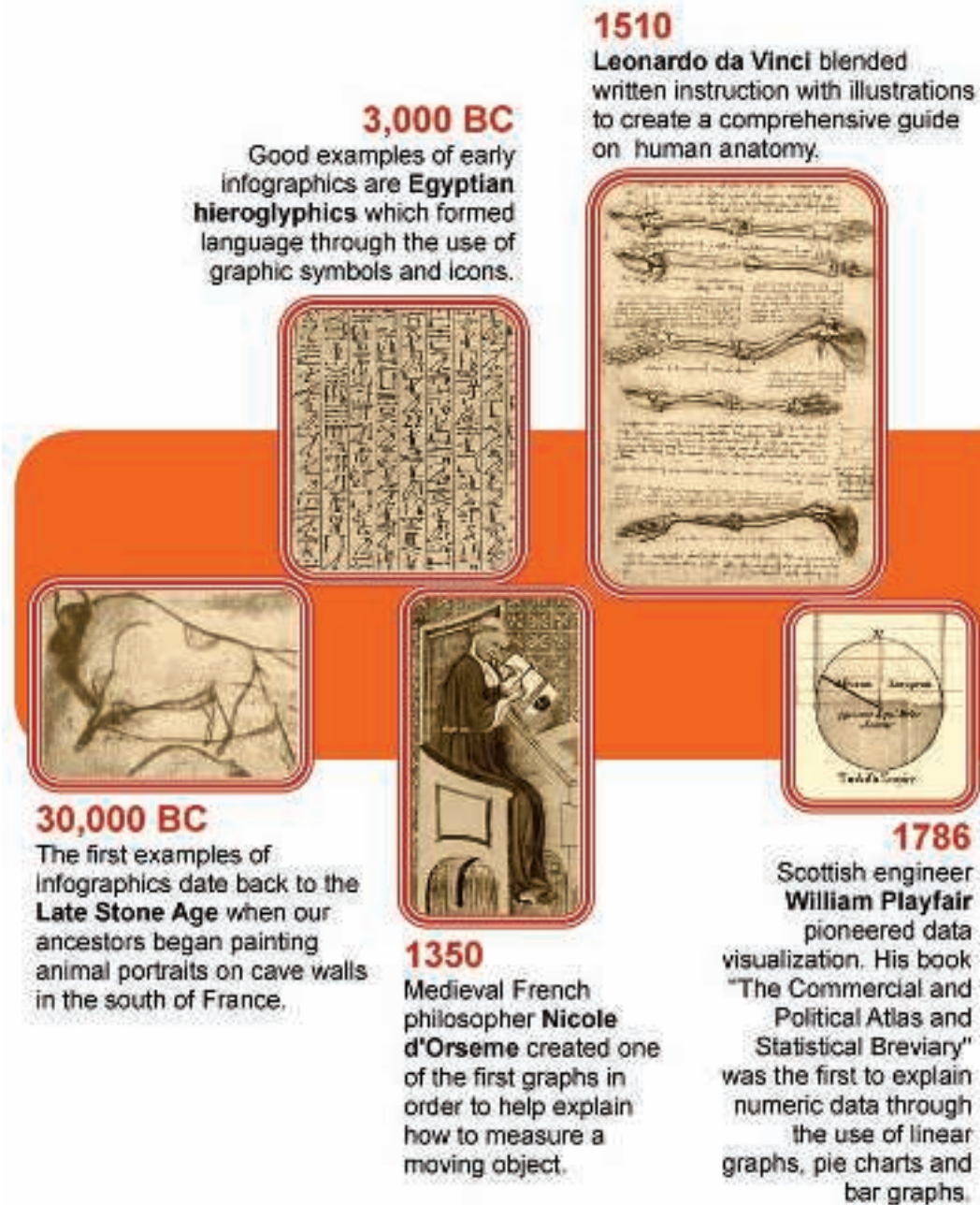
Each letter in a word is essentially a symbol. To read text, the brain needs to act as a decoder first, matching those letters with shapes stored in memory. From there the brain must figure out how all the letters fit together to form words, how words form sentences, and how sentences form paragraphs. Although all this comprehension takes place in only a split second, relatively speaking, when compared to how the brain deals with images, the process requires considerably more mental effort.³

One of the reasons we can process images faster than text is because of how the brain handles information. It processes data from pictures all at once but processes text in a linear manner, as shown in Figure 1.3.

So, in a way, by using infographics to communicate, you make it physically easier for your audience to relate and connect to your information.

In a TED talk about the beauty of data visualization, writer and designer David McCandless expands on the idea that infographics provide a sense of relief in a landscape filled with a mind-numbing amount of information:

“There’s something almost quite magical about visual information. It’s effortless. It literally pours in. If you’re navigating a dense information jungle, coming across a beautiful graphic or lovely data visualization is a relief. It’s like coming across a clearing in the jungle.”⁴



Source: Wikipedia.com

FIGURE 1.2

A brief history of infographics.

1857

English nurse **Florence Nightingale** combined stacked bar/ pie charts (Coxcomb chart) to illustrate the monthly number of casualties and causes of death explain during the Crimean War. She used these infographics to help convince Queen Victoria to improve conditions in military hospitals.

**1970-1990**

Infographics became more popular as **mainstream news publications** like The Sunday Times (UK), Time Magazine and USA Today began using them to simplify information and enhance comprehension of complicated issues and news stories.

**1850-1870**

Charles Joseph Minard, a Civil Engineer from France, began combining maps with flow charts in order to explain geographical statistics. One of his most famous data visualizations illustrated the causes of Napoleon's failed attempt to invade Russia. He captured a complex data set for the period (map location, direction travelled, decline in troops and temperature) in a single infographic.

**1930-1940**

The modern era ushered in Isotype, a visual communication model developed by **Otto Neurath** to teach ideas and concepts through the use of icons and pictures.

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