

10: Use Visuals to Highlight, Not Decorate

Visuals can transform complex information into something instantly clear and engaging. But not all visuals add value—some can distract or clutter the message.

This stage focuses on using visuals to emphasize key points and clarify complex data, comparisons, or processes.

This guide walks you through identifying where visuals add value, selecting the best type of visual for each point, and keeping them clear and focused.

Step-by-Step Guide

Step 1: Decide Where Visuals Will Add Value

Adding visuals where they help clarify or emphasize important information ensures readers can quickly grasp the core message. Visuals are best suited for sections that involve complex data, comparisons, or sequences.

Look over your document and note any sections with complex information that could benefit from a visual. Aim to simplify rather than simply add decoration.

Guiding Question: *Where in my work would a visual aid make understanding easier?*

Tips for Identifying Visual Needs:

- **Look for Complexity:** Data-heavy sections, processes, and sequential steps often benefit from visuals.
- **Identify Key Messages:** Where you want to make a lasting impression, a visual can often reinforce the point.
- **Avoid Visual Overload:** Use visuals selectively to maintain focus and clarity.

Step 2: Choose the Right Type of Visual

Different visuals suit different types of information. Selecting the right format enhances understanding—charts work well for data, while infographics suit summaries and flowcharts are ideal for processes.

For each section you identified, choose a type of visual that best represents the information. Match the visual type to the data or concept you're presenting.

Guiding Question: *Which type of visual will best represent this information?*

Tips for Choosing Visual Types:

- **Use Charts for Data:** Line, bar, and pie charts are effective for quantitative comparisons or trends.
- **Consider Flowcharts for Processes:** Flowcharts are ideal for outlining sequences or steps.
- **Use Infographics for Overviews:** Infographics work well for summarizing several key points visually.
- **Keep It Simple:** Avoid complex visuals that might confuse the reader.

Step 3: Label and Caption Each Visual

Labels and captions provide context, so readers understand what each visual represents without needing extra explanations. This reinforces the message while keeping the visuals self-explanatory.

Add a label and caption to each visual, keeping the label brief and using the caption to highlight the key takeaway.

Guiding Question: *What should readers understand from this visual at a glance?*

Tips for Labels and Captions:

- **Be Clear and Direct:** Avoid jargon or ambiguous language.
- **Focus on Takeaways:** The caption should summarize the main point or finding the visual represents.
- **Make It Stand Alone:** Each visual should be understandable even if read out of context.

Step 4: Keep Visuals Clean and Simple

Overly complex visuals can distract from the core message, making information harder to absorb. Clean visuals help readers focus on the main points without unnecessary distractions.

Simplify each visual by removing extra colors, patterns, or elements that don't contribute to understanding. Stick to a minimalistic style that emphasizes clarity.

Guiding Question: *How can I make this visual easy to understand at a glance?*

Tips for Simplifying Visuals:

- **Limit Colors:** Use one or two colors to differentiate data without overwhelming the reader.
- **Avoid Extra Elements:** Remove patterns, unnecessary icons, or embellishments.
- **Stick to Basic Shapes:** Simple shapes like arrows, circles, or boxes guide readers without clutter.
- **Emphasize Key Data:** Highlight the most important part of the visual to guide readers' attention.