Making facts and numbers visible

Explanation Graphics

**Seven things to think about
when you are designing maps, charts and diagrams.**

1. Draw. Explanation graphics are pictures—pictures of facts and numbers. To make information accessible, you must make legible drawings. But there's another reason to draw: it keeps your artistic roots watered—a reminder that you are a human being in an increasingly mechanised and desensitised workplace. Keep a sketchbook with you all the time, and make visual notes. **Don't just rush to the computer.** Think it out. *Draw* it out.

2. Collaborate. The best explanations use a **combination of words and pictures.** When the two are thoughtfully joined together readers can get a better understanding of the subject. *Sounds obvious?* In practice, it doesn't seem to happen very often. Get out of your art boxes, and work with the writers across the hall.

3. Use less color. When you are designing a chart or a map, consider what each color means. **Think of color as an information tool.** One way is to start all graphics in black & white, and only add other colors when the information demands it, for clarity.
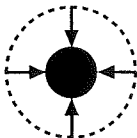
4. Make it smaller. Almost all explanations are better when they are concise. (If the subject is complex, you don't want to scare readers away with a huge diagram that's difficult to follow.) Ask yourself: what are the important points I'm trying to communicate?

5. Put facts in context. One way understand facts and numbers is to see them in a different context—one that has everyday meaning. **Q.** How big is an acre? **A.** 43,560 square feet. Big deal. *This* is better: It's a football field minus the endzone*.

6. Check it out! Readers notice mistakes, so the facts must be right. If you make mistakes, readers will soon stop caring about anything you do.

7. Don't be a decorator. Resist requests from art directors and editors to fill graphics with dimensional effects and surface gloss. They may think that doing so will make their pages look more colorful, or cutting edge, but information graphics are not the place for such indulgences. Even though you may be good at making surfaces look shiny, try the opposite: use your computer to help simplify your work. The resulting pared-down images will force you (and readers) to look at the **content** more closely.